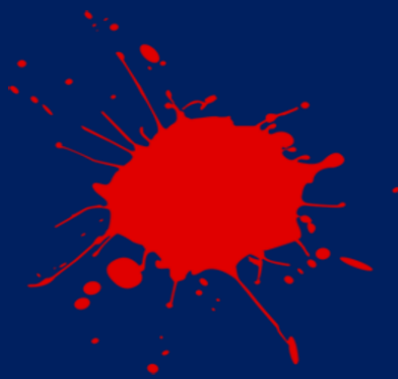


DAMES KILL

EM

HARDER!!!

*A PLÍNIO TADEU DE GOES JR.
NOVEL*



DAMES KILL 'EM HARDER
A Novel

By
Plínio Tadeu de Góes Jr.

1. Hostage Situation

Coral Reef Danny's Diner was a helluva lot bigger than Joe had anticipated. He felt like a fish in a glass bowl, a large bowl like the one his father had kept on the kitchen counter by the empty liquor bottles. The walls of the place were decorated with portraits of strange old people and two perky small American flags on maple-colored wood stands stood proudly next to every brown salt shaker. Sitting in a chair in a booth, his feet up on the table and his fingers interlaced, was the President himself. Yes, the President.

Now, the President wasn't actually a *real* President, like someone who ran a country. They just called him that for fun, as a joke or as a sort of compliment. He had a creased face and tight smile that refused to move for anyone and his eyes gleamed like black jewels underneath his thick eyebrows. There was a devious and at the same time serious air to the man. He looked like a leader, the sort of man the blind masses would follow.

A tall, tan woman with long legs strolled over to the table with the sexy carelessness of a lonely airline waitress, coffee pot in hand, her hair tied back in a bun like a Swedish schoolteacher. She leaned over the President, threw the Leader of the Free World a carefully designed coy smile, and refilled his brown coffee mug. Then, as smoothly as she had drifted into the room like a ghost, she turned and glided back to the kitchen and left them alone. Just the two of them in the whole place - the President and Waikiki Joe, a lowly soldier in the War on Crime, a cog, a peon in a much larger game.

The President's real name was Reginald Sang and he was the Chief of Police in Stamford, Connecticut, a midsized New England city famous for the headquarters of a wrestling federation filled to the brim with muscle heads and not much else at all. It was a boring place. The soldier's name was Joseph Patterson Waikiki and he was a Lieutenant of Hawaiian and German descent – which is kind of like being from the Moon and Earth at the same time - and, informally, the guy they called in case of hostage situations like the one facing them on this day. He was the go-to guy when things got out of control, the Cool Guy they called him, the most simplistic nickname ever to have been bestowed. *The Cool Guy*.

"What do they call you? Joseph or Joe?" President Sang inquired before taking a sip of his coffee. "Hell, I'm surprised we haven't met before with your reputation. At least, if we did, I can't remember for the life of me. They say you're the Cool Guy, the one to call when things get tough, when there's no one else to call. Are you really the Cool Guy? That's what they say you are. They call you that."

"No, I'm not. My name is Lieutenant Joe Waikiki, sir. That's it. Just Joe Waikiki. Some creative people around town call me Waikiki Joe," he replied, shifting restlessly in his suit like a twelve-year-old boy getting his first kiss. He felt itchy, his nervousness manifesting itself physically in the form of a thousand ants. Why didn't he buy himself decent suits for God's sake? Oh, that's right – because he was poor, a cop with a salary that could barely cover his mortgage, car payments, and the occasional wine cooler.

"Well, Mr. Waikiki Joe, Mr. Cool Guy, it seems to me as if you have some information I happen to require," the President said, throwing him a polite smile like a snake throwing a mouse a wink. "You know why you've been called here, don't you, my boy? I need to know the details about what's happening out there. It's a jungle. That's what it is."

Yes, the Situation. There was no other reason for his being called to the President's "Office," if you wanted to call this greasy diner that. The President placed his mug somewhat less full of coffee back on the table resolutely and stared into space like an astronaut gazing out a porthole for a few seconds before continuing with his inquisition. He needed to choose

his words carefully, to phrase his terms so they wouldn't come back to bite him later. These were political days in the department. One had to be careful.

"Well, my good friend Joe, I need to know some things about this situation. Some things about what's happening here, what's happening out there in the streets. I think I know everything I need to know but I like to hear it over and over again just to memorize it, to verify it, to breathe it in. You know the drill, my boy. Over and over again."

"I'll tell you everything I know. If I leave anything out, it isn't on purpose. I'm an open book. As open as a church after the head priest has passed out drunk on the sacramental wine. I'm as open as a twenty-four bar in the red light district in Prague."

"What does he look like, Joe?"

"The Suspect? Well, sir, I'd have -"

"You call him 'the Suspect' still? He doesn't have a name yet? He's still 'the Suspect,' Joe? No name on him?"

"We haven't been able to communicate with him, sir. We're working on being able to find someone who can actually decipher his language, his peculiar African tongue. There is a linguist – a Dr. Drex – who might be able to help us translate. Dr. Drex works at Sacred Heart University right here in Stamford. He might be on his way over here right now, in fact. I sent some good guys to pick him up. The fellas picking him up should bring him here to check in with you as soon as he gets to the scene."

"You called a linguist, huh? Good, Joe. So tell me - what does 'the Suspect' look like? Like a local immigrant? Like he might be from one of our communities?"

"He has four limbs, two legs and two arms like everybody else, sir. Aside from that, we don't really know too much about him. We don't even understand him when he tries to communicate. He speaks some crazy foreign tongue, for Pete's sake, some African voodoo sort of speak. It's insane."

President Sang rose and pushed his chair into the table, walking to the window. He pulled open the drapes angrily and allowed the image of the unnerving sun to flood his Oval Office like an intruder invading a home. The light danced on his grey suit and tie and his hair seemed to emit a sort of sacred halo of grease. Joe rubbed his eyes lazily. He had been up for too long watching re-runs on the tube before being called in for this and was starting to see things in double. He had to stop drinking. As soon as possible. Those liquor bottles mounting up on his bed weren't doing him any good.

So, here's the rub. It had been a few hours since the Stamford Police had been called in to address a hostage situation at the Motel Fleur, someone yelling for help, squealing for someone to save him. Two officers had approached the room, knocked on the door diligently. They had been met by a welcoming committee of bullets fired from a machine gun, perhaps an Uzi. Joe had been called in as the resident Cool Operator, the Cool Guy himself, the guy with the nerves of steel, and Joe had made the initial call into the room to try to make contact. When the gunman (he assumed it had been the gunman) had answered, he had spoken a strange language that wasn't English or Spanish, not Chinese or Japanese but something African-sounding. Finally, the Chief of Police had arrived and His Majesty had set up shop in the Diner like a traveling king setting up a Medieval Court. That was everything. Joe didn't know anything else.

"Do we know *who* the hostage is?" Sang inquired. "Is it someone important or just some idiot who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time? These are political times, Joe, and they'll fire someone just for thinking about screwing up."

"We don't know. The room was registered to a Mr. John Lennon is all I can say."

"So we don't know anything at all do we? We don't know the hostage's name, the perp's name, the guy who rented the room. Not a damn thing."

“No, sir. We don’t.”

“Tell me something, Joe. You don’t seem like a stupid guy. Don’t give me that blank stare that the other guys give me. Let me know there’s a brain working under that ugly mug.”

“We know that a gunman is sitting in the Motel Fleur with a hostage and that the gunman doesn’t speak a word of English. Aside from that, we know anything at all. We’re in the dark with this thing, sir. The only thing we can do is hope the linguist gets here and is able to talk to the perp.”

The President walked away from the sun, dissatisfied with the answer, and back to his maple-syrup-stained desk. He texted someone using his bright pink cell phone, his nails perfectly manicured, his face shaved so smooth not a trace of a hair appeared. In a matter of seconds, the door to the Diner opened and a man twice as muscular as Joe strolled in as confidently as only a truly large man can. Chief Sang extended a suspiciously joyous hand at the elephant-sized man and they exchanged greetings. Sang was almost giddy, like a schoolgirl meeting the high school quarterback. Joe knew then that Sang was obviously a homosexual, not that there was anything wrong with that. Joe liked homosexuals – they didn’t compete with him for the few women that were willing to give him the time of day.

“This is Mr. Phillips, Lee Phillips III,” the President explained, his round face smiling above broad shoulders, his eyes shining. “He is a fine physical specimen to say the least, Joe. You will agree, Mr. Waikiki Joe? He’s a fine specimen, right? Just beautiful! Just a beautiful specimen! Isn’t he a beautiful specimen, Joe?”

“Yes,” Joe pronounced awkwardly, inspecting the other man hesitantly. While Joe was approximately six feet in height and the President stood a couple inches taller, Mr. Phillips must have been about six feet six. Furthermore, while neither he nor the President had muscular builds, Mr. Phillips enjoyed a substantially more solid construction, his biceps like bowling balls. “He’s good. I mean, he’s not a skinny guy like some of the new graduates I’ve seen around. Some of them look about sixteen years old.”

“Mr. Phillips is indeed a fit specimen, above average it appears upon a cursory examination,” Chief Sang purred covetously. “Yes, yes! Might be the toughest son of a gun we have on our force. He’s a tough, big bastard. A real tough, big bastard. I like him a lot.”

“Thank you,” Mr. Phillips said, beaming. “I like you too sir.”

“Well,” the President continued, massaging the man’s arm affectionately, “Mr. Phillips can be quite useful to you, Joe. He’s only been on the force a few days, fresh from the academy, you see. He came highly recommended, though. Can’t hurt to have a big jerk like this one with you in a situation like this, can it? A big jerk! A great, big, beautiful jerk! Given the sensitive nature of this matter, I give him to you for temporary use as an assistant in case something goes wrong. He’s my gift.”

“Hopefully nothing will go wrong, sir,” Joe replied. “In fact, nothing will go wrong.”

“We all hope so,” Mr. Phillips said his voice so deep it seemed to come from a metal pipe leading to the bottom of a deep well inside the very core of the earth. It was strange that they called him *Mister* Phillips, not *Officer* Phillips, as if his job was extralegal, like a paid assassin. Joe was the resident Cool Guy and Phillips was the professional Tough Guy it seemed. Hell, Joe thought those types of department nicknames were as stupid as letting drunkards teach high school kids how to drive safely.

The President nodded approvingly. Joe and Mr. Phillips bowed before retreating from the Oval Office like servants, leaving their Leader staring at the sun, thinking (surely) about what Phillips looked like wearing a thong. Joe and Mr. Phillips found themselves facing an empty grass field by the parking lot outside the Diner. They observed the other cops rushing about busily, positioning themselves for an assault on the Motel. Joe could not help but wonder whether the Suspect, as odd and possibly dangerous as he might be, was but one of

thousands of equally severe problems the city faced every day. Stamford was far from extreme poverty – it was no Hartford – but a dreadful malaise seemed to be sneaking up on it, homeless people popping up everywhere. It seemed to be falling apart.

“Is it always this busy, here?” Joe joked with an officer smoking a cigarette lazily.

“Only around election time,” the officer replied. “The rest of the year, something like this happens and no one cares. Heck, if there wasn’t an election soon, I’d be sitting at home watching the News. I’m not even supposed to be working today.”

The streets, usually filled to the brim with working stiffs, couples strolling, and children wrestling, had been cleared. Joe and Mr. Phillips walked to a park bench near a pond with a stone fountain. Joe pointed at the bench and Mr. Phillips nodded. They sat. They had plans to make. They needed to resolve this thing.

“I should tell you that the Suspect is a very strange creature to behold so that you should be prepared to be shocked when you see him. He appears to be male. He is extremely short, around 5’6” and his face is covered by a substantial amount of blood.”

“Interesting,” Mr. Phillips said. “What else?”

“He has some facial hair, so it is our belief that he is not a minor. We don’t know the source of the blood. It could be his or it could belong to the hostage. We have no information as to whose blood it is. It could be anyone’s blood.”

“Anything else I should know?”

“His skin appears to be burned pretty badly, his nose is busted up. He could have killed the hostage when his victim put up a struggle. We don’t know. The hostage could be a corpse. We just don’t know. He could be sitting in there with a dead man.”

“Jesus!” Mr. Phillips hissed. “You think he might’ve killed the guy already.”

“Are you a religious man?”

Mr. Phillips looked down at his feet in utter shame. He was a priest’s illegitimate son. His earliest memories were of ceremonies where wine was drunk and psalms were sung by sweaty people full of dreams. It seemed to him that most of his life had taken place in that church. Still, a cop shouldn’t ever be *too* religious. Faith could stop you from killing a man when you needed to squeeze that trigger and blow someone away – and Mr. Phillips had no problem squeezing the trigger when push came to shove. No problem at all.

“I – I am not,” Mr. Phillips muttered. “Of course not. I believe in guns and the law.”

“I see,” Joe pronounced disdainfully. “Well, the Suspect is no devil. He might seem like a creature from some far off place, however, a universe far worse than the one we happen to live in, but he is not an evil spirit. It is up to us to gather as much information as possible and then dispose of him or arrest him before he kills any of our officers. Remember, the guy is just a man. Just a scumbag like any other.”

“Yes, I know. Just a man. A criminal. It’s my first hostage situation.”

“Good.”

They sat in silence thinking about the world around them until they heard footsteps. Two men, their shadows moving towards them. Their faces became visible. One man was taller, just over six feet, while the other was shorter, just under six feet. The taller man was thinner with a light brown complexion, his head shaved, and the shorter man bulkier with a fair complexion and yellow hair.

Mr. Phillips and Joe shaved their heads bald. That was the custom of men of the law in Stamford. They both correctly assumed that the bald man was an officer like them. They therefore correctly concluded that the shorter man with the sweater vest must be the linguist, Dr. Andrew Drex, the key to resolving this whole matter. They all exchanged brief pleasantries, the sort of trifles society forces upon professional men. The taller man waved with an open palm.

"I am Officer Rick Rey," he said with a baritone, "and this is Dr. Andrew Drex, the linguist. Chief Sang told us to come find you guys. I just talked to him on the phone a couple seconds ago. He said we should make sure you're doing your jobs. He said he just spoke to you guys. Did he speak to you? Are you the guys we're looking for?"

"You can tell him that we're discussing strategy," Joe replied. "Yes, we're doing our damn jobs sitting out here. They call me Joe. You aren't the guy I sent to pick up Dr. Drex. I sent two other clowns. Who are you? I've never met you before. I've never heard of you."

"The guys you sent called me to do it," Rey replied. "They were busy with something else. I don't know what. They asked me to fill in. I'm ready to do whatever you tell me, Joe. Officer Rey reporting for duty. Ready for action. Eager to prove myself."

"You follow my orders at all times, Rey, or I will shoot you and kill you without hesitation, Officer. If I so much as hear of a mistake you've committed, I will kill you or at least spit on you and knock you out. If you speak to the press, I will kill you or punch your lights out. In essence, follow the rules or your death will be slow and extremely painful. The man standing next to me is Phillips, a professional bodybuilder who likes long walks on the beach and girls from Malibu. He's a part of the Chief's personal honor guard apparently and will serve as a security specialist for this mission, or the muscle or some other damn thing I haven't figured out. Have you been briefed?"

"We know the basics," Dr. Drex said, "although the basics are hard to believe. I've never heard of something like this happening in Stamford. This is a quiet town."

"Believe it," Mr. Phillips said. "We are dealing with an abnormal situation here, at least for Stamford. Our town doesn't get to deal with these types of situations very often, so we have to make sure to play it smart here. This thing has to be taken care of as quickly as possible."

"Mr. Phillips is correct," Joe added. "We will be dealing with an organism the likes of which you have never seen before and we rarely see here in our city. We can call it Scum-Baggius-Maximus and it is nature's most dangerous creature, I promise you, gentlemen. As I was telling Mr. Phillips, be prepared to be shocked by the Suspect's unconventional physical appearance. He looks a little weird. He's not the usual suspect."

"How is it shocking?" Dr. Drex asked. "Is he deformed in some respect, a victim of some accident? I was told that he is able to communicate, that you need my help to decipher his language. I was told that you don't even know where he's from. That's what I was told."

"He is scarred and dangerous," Joe explained, nodding, "although he is small in stature. That's all we know. Yes boys, his skin is all messed up, all melted or cut up or some damned thing. We don't know why his face looks the way it does. We don't know where he comes from. Looks to be some African thing, though."

"I see," Rick Rey said, nodding his head energetically. "He might be a member of one of our communities here in town. He might be a local."

"Let's go talk to him!" Waikiki Joe barked with authority. It was time to stop chatting and start acting. There was no sense just standing around waiting for someone else to provide them with the answers. They needed to go in and get the answers themselves.

"He sounds diseased! Maybe we should get a physician to come with us?" Dr. Drex suggested. He didn't want to be infected. "We don't want to expose ourselves to some horrible African virus that makes your flesh peel off. Hell, we don't know what we're walking into, gentlemen. This could be really serious. This could have big repercussions for this whole town."

"Whether he needs a doctor can only be determined after my own preliminary scientific examination of the man," Joe said, shutting down the doctor's attempt at procrastination. "At this point, we have no evidence of any diseases, mental or otherwise. We

just have to go ahead and do this thing, damn it. We take care of this thing like any other thing. We're not dealing with the devil. He's a man after all. Let's go! No more chatter. It's time to do something. I'm not calling the feds for this."

"All right," Dr. Drex mumbled. "I know. Let's just do this damned thing. I have to go home to my wife as soon as possible. She needs me to pick up some things! I have to pick up toothpaste and deodorant. She gets mad at me if I don't get her what she wants. Let's talk to the suspect, whatever his name is."

Alfred. The Suspect's name was *Alfred*. Alfred's father had told him when he was a boy that he's a sort of devil incarnate. Then, he had told him that he's a lost soul from a lost tribe, a tribe of devils. Then, he had begun screaming at the ceiling like a drug-addled fool, directing his rant at a light bulb illuminating his war-torn face. After that, his father had fallen back on the sofa and collapsed into a heavy sleep with his big bottle of brown liquor firmly grasped in his white palms and a used syringe in his pocket. That was back in Liberia, back in the homeland, back in Africa. A million miles away.

Now, he was very far from Liberia, out in the middle of nowhere in a small town in Connecticut – although Liberia wasn't a very big place either. He stared at the window, gazing helplessly at the mist of freezing air out there, the sunlight illuminating the snow, making him feel like some sort of angel. Maybe he was an angel, an African angel lost in the Americas, far from home. He closed his eyes for a minute, then opened them at the sound of strangers walking on the stained carpet in the hallway.

"Stop or I'll shoot!" he shouted in his tribal language. "Stop! Stop! Stop!"

"My name is Lieutenant Joe Waikiki," someone said, in English.

"Go away!" he shouted back in English.

"You speak English?" Joe Waikiki asked.

"Yes," the man replied.

"Then, why the heck did I have to go and get myself a doggone linguist for?" Joe Waikiki shouted angrily. "Why did I have to do that, buddy? Why did you make me go and get a damned linguist for? I didn't need one! I wasted my time!"

"Excuse me?"

"I thought you didn't speak English so I went and got myself a frigging linguist. Why didn't you speak English before? God stomp it! What is your name? Start talking. You're frustrating me, pal. Start talking!"

"Alfred."

"Can I come in, Alfred? I'm not armed, I promise."

"Sure, Joe."

Alfred had a sullen look about him, standing there naked. He proceeded to dig inside one of the closets in the room, keeping Joe in his sights all the while. He was searching for a shirt but he didn't find anything. He reached inside a bag by the bed and found one. He thanked Joe for his patience and managed to find his jacket, shoes, and a knit cap in the same bag. His hostage was sitting motionless in the corner with a bag over his head.

"Let whoever that is go, buddy," Joe said. "There's no need to make a scene here. I'll give you time to get dressed. There's no need to feel embarrassed, pal. No scenes here. Not a bigger one than you've already made anyways with all this shooting. I mean, you're naked, holding a gun, pointing it at an officer. That's enough drama for one day. No need for any more. Let's stop the drama."

"You got any food?" Alfred asked. "I could eat a water buffalo. My throat aches. I don't think I've had water for a while. I'm just coming out of it, this feeling I had because of some stuff I took. I shot myself up with some stuff."

"Didn't eat today," Joe replied. "But I have four dollars and each of these bills has your name on them if you're interested. I'll give you my money. You can have my wallet. You can have anything you want. Just give me the gun."

"I have three bucks," Alfred observed. "Just three bucks."

"Then, let's use some teamwork, put these bills together like good boys and get ourselves some food over at the diner. Can we agree on that, Alfred? It might be nice to go

and get ourselves some food. Wouldn't that be nice, Alfred? Get ourselves some pancakes, maybe some waffles, hash browns. Just hand over the firearm."

"You look like a TV cop," Alfred observed, his lower lip trembling. His eyes were sunken and his torn skin exhibited a reddish hue beneath the blood. "Like one of those officers you would see on the old shows but with shorter hair. Like the guy from a show I used to watch when I was a boy. You look like the guy from that show. I can't remember the name of it for the life of me."

"I'm balding. The cop you're thinking of must be a bald one. Is that your blood on your face, Alfred?"

"No. It isn't. Well, maybe some of it. I just don't know. It might be. I've taken some stuff and I'm lost right about now, Joe. Shot myself up with some stuff."

"What's that mumbo jumbo you were talking? Is that African? Some African language? Is that where you're from, Alfred?"

"It's called Kpelle. It's my language. Not mumbo jumbo. Don't call it mumbo jumbo, Joe. That's not right. That's offensive."

Dr. Drex had been standing in the middle of the hallway outside the room smoking nervously, his hair like a shaggy carpet glued to his skull. He climbed into the room without saying a word as soon as he heard "Kpelle", sitting next to the door, behind Joe. He seemed to realize all of a sudden that he didn't know what he was doing and jumped up, wondering whether he should run out of the room like a frightened girl seeing a boy she liked. He had heard "Kpelle" and had assumed that it was his cue to show his knowledge of the African tongues. Now, he didn't know what to say. He licked his lips awkwardly, as awkward as a real academic.

"I speak Kpelle," he finally stammered, stamping his feet. Outside, Joe could see a group of young officers standing in the street, lining up a shot. Alfred was going to die very soon if he didn't put his gun down. Joe didn't want anyone to die. He wanted to resolve this thing without any bloodshed.

"Why?" Alfred asked. "You are not Liberian. Why speak Kpelle? No one speaks Kpelle. A lot of people in Liberia don't even speak it."

"Yes, but I am a linguist you see, Alfred. Also, my wife just happens to be from Sierra Leone. She's from Africa, like you, my boy. A psych professor. Yep, psychology, Alfred. You like psychology, Alfred? Ever study any psychology, Alfred? You go to school at all?"

Joe couldn't believe what he was hearing so he just stood there smiling in his cheap suit. He was missing a couple teeth and his eyes glimmered. He sat down on the carpet and sighed. Dr. Drex played with his moptop haircut and Alfred trembled. They had nothing to say to each other. Finally, Joe stood back up and decided to speak. He was the one in charge after all. He needed to wind the kid down, get him to put the gun on the carpet.

"You know, Alfred, I just happen to be from the best place in this country, from the great state of Hawaii and I used to play football there in a little town called Lihue for a little high school out there. I had a coach, a big redneck fella named Louie and he stood up one day in front of the team and he said to all of us: 'Look at yourselves, boys. Look at yourselves. We got all types here, that's for sure. And you don't have anything at all, not a penny to your names. I know I'm not supposed to say that, boys, because that just isn't the way you're supposed to talk these days with all the politics, but I don't care because we aren't in any fancy kind of government school here, just the cheap kind for poor kids. This is *our* school, *our* field. Your mothers, your fathers, grandfathers, grandmothers – why did they come here to Hawaii? Wasn't for any other reason than the desire to fight for a better life. Now, you've got the chance to fight but it's too hard. Well, hard is good. Things should be hard. This is our island. You want easy, you pack up, go live on the mainland, move down to Florida like those old folks do after they retire, sit around talking, watch too much television and buy a silly hat with a whole assortment of neat buttons. Do you guys want to be a bunch of silly old timers living in Florida?' We all said 'no!' real loud - but I have to tell you Alfred, I think getting old and retiring in Florida, buying a silly hat with buttons on it, is a heck of a lot better than dying young for no reason at all, just to be a rebel. What do you think, Alfred? You want to keep fighting, keep going with this life thing? You want to die young, die a senseless death?"

Alfred replied that he didn't want to have to get old and Joe told him to get his head out of his posterior and play like playing meant something. He also told Alfred to take it easy. He's the star player and they didn't want to see him get hurt. Joe repeated to Alfred that he had been a great football player at his school back in his home town in Hawaii and that back then he thought he was going to be a great big star.

"We played hard and I would drive all the guys home, our legs sore, Alfred. Nobody ever talked on the way back from practice because they were dead tired. As they crawled out of my car and back to their homes, they would barely manage to wave goodbye they would be so weak. I would barely manage a smile. That's what practice was like for me. It gave me an appreciation for life. Life is good. Life is *great*, Alfred. Believe in it. Believe in life, son. Give me that gun. Don't give up yet."

"Really?" Alfred asked, sarcastically. "You want to know what my life has been like, Joe? You want to share. You do, don't you? I would come home and my mother would be checking my brother's arms for needle marks as I walked into the kitchen. Father would be reading his paper, his coffee cup in his trembling hand – you see, he was the user. His big belly would heave up and down like a seal floating in the frigid ocean and he would punctuate his reading with indecipherable muttering. The fading sun would filter in past the curtains, falling upon our green tiles. My brother would sit down next to Father after Mother was through with him. A short while later, we would go to bed and I would hear my mother cry for the dying children in our country every single night. That's a better story than your football story, I think."

"Africa is a real tough place, no doubts about that in this head of mine," Joe said, folding his arms, trying to be emotive, to show he cared about what he was about to say. That's what it was all about, establishing a connection with the perp to get him to calm down. Empathy needed to be conveyed. "Real tough, Alfred. I bet your mother would want you to have a better life here in the States, my friend. Is this a better life, Alfred? Is this what she had in mind, pal? Seems like a disappointment. Put the damn gun down."

"I got him good, Joe," Alfred replied, looking at the man in the corner, his hostage. The man wasn't breathing. He was definitely dead. "The son of a hyena isn't in good shape, Joe. I got him so good! I took care of him! He's dead, the coldhearted fool!"

"Maybe you got him too good. Wait, *who* did you get? What was his name, Alfred?"

"Yeah, maybe a little too good. I got the son of a dog. He's not going to try to kill me anymore. I'm safe. That's what matters. He tried to kill me, Joe! He tried to kill me!"

"*Who* is the son of a dog, Alfred? His name."

"Do me a favor and get out of here before I shoot you. I'm tired, Joe, and I just want to go to bed. I'm so tired I could just kill someone for no reason at all. Just for the heck of it. I'm so sick of violence, I could kill everyone I see."

He made a motion at Joe as if he was going to shoot him but Joe didn't flinch. He just shrugged. The kid seemed like a nice enough kid, just confused, lost. He seemed like the victim more than the perp. And Joe didn't scare that easily.

Mr. Phillips could not hide his disgust as he watched Waikiki Joe and the suspect talking from the window just outside the room. How strange this man! So devoid of any normality, as if his link to humanity had been sucked away, his face covered with scars! They didn't get many men like that in Stamford. People here were normal.

A sedative gas could render the Suspect inert, the thing falling asleep almost immediately. Some insane man from Africa stumbles into America and thinks he's some kind of long lost king, can do anything he wants. Not in his town.

"Who is this guy?" an officer standing near him asked. "This Joe Waikiki? Everybody says he's the Cool Guy, the one they go to in hostage situations, high stress type happenings. I couldn't be that guy, but I'm not nuts. You heard of this guy? You know this Joe?"

"To be frank with you, it appears that I don't really care who he is. He's doing a damn good job at keeping the situation under control. He might be able to talk this guy down."

"Maybe. Why does this perp look the way he does? Radiation exposure, haha?"

“Radiation exposure? Seriously? What do they teach you guys at the academy? Those are tribal scars. Frigging tribal scars, Officer. The guy is from Africa. He has African tribal scars on his face. It’s not radiation. Radiation? Where did you get that?”

“Same things they taught you, Phillips, you humorless jackal,” the officer replied, standing a few feet away, far enough not get punched in the jaw. It wasn’t wise to mess around with a guy as big as this Phillips. “What are we going to do, big fella? This stuff makes me a little squeamish. I hate this part. I hate rushing in. I always get afraid of dying. I’m too young to die. Too good-looking.”

Phillips turned towards him and smiled. “Guess you should have thought of that before you became a cop, huh? This is a tough business, Officer. Grow a pair! Grow them fast because if you don’t have baseballs down there, you’re going to sink.”

“He is a male,” the officer stated flatly, ignoring the comments. “That’s the only thing we know about him. He is male. A guy. Nothing else.”

“Really?” Phillips asked sarcastically. They were both listening to the ongoing conversation happening in that motel room, listening on a radio on the hood of a police vehicle. Joe had been fitted with a wire and they could hear everything. “At this point in time, we have insufficient evidence to confirm that hypothesis aside from the fact that the man’s name is Alfred and he has a male voice. If he is a man-woman hybrid mutation, he may be harmless, however. What I fear, is that he may be some form of biological weapon from some far off planet, Officer, like Mars or something. The way he arrived on his starship, in a capsule – well, it seems to me a bit *suspicious*.”

“Very funny, jerk. Why is his skin like that? He looks like a corpse. What’s wrong with him? Why’s he cut up like that?”

“Tribal scars, I told you already, and some war wounds maybe. I told you twice. You never listen. He is a pitiful sort of creature, isn’t he? Jeeze Louise, what a poor loser. The poor guy probably had a tough life. I don’t want to use the snipers just yet because I don’t think he’ll shoot if he’s exposed to a couple seconds of uncertainty. We’ll do this with gas. Joe’s calmed him down enough that he’s not going to go crazy once the gas goes off.”

The officer nodded and looked at the glass. Inside, behind that glass, were Joe, Alfred and Dr. Drex, the linguist. Phillips motioned for the officer to enter the motel and the officer sighed and walked away. The officer proceeded to enter a passageway comprised of two doors separated by a small space. The first door opened and he entered the tiny passageway, position himself near the door into the Motel. Then, he closed his eyes and opened the second door and he walked into the Motel, slithering into the lion’s lair like a Christian about to be eaten by an untamable beast.

Phillips watched patiently, listening to the conversation occurring inside, a few feet away. Waikiki Joe was good, really good. He knew how to build trust, keep it light, get the guy to let his guard down. The man had been so nervous that all he could do was mutter in that incomprehensible language. Now, Waikiki Joe had the man speaking English. The guy was communicating, threatening but his threats were lethargic, half-hearted, almost sleepy. He was winding down, getting ready to give up.

“Kpelle?” Phillips asked himself. “What the heck is Kpelle? Damn mumbo jumbo. That’s what it is. You’re going to go to sleep, Mr. Kpelle, a good long sleep. No one is getting killed today. I’m sure as hell not taking any chances and I don’t feeling like killing you today.”

“This conversation is being recorded because there’s a wire in my suit,” Joe confessed to Alfred. “It’s being transmitted to the guys outside this window listening in. Just being

honest with you. Letting you know about what's happening here with this whole situation. I don't keep secrets. I'm being honest with you and I expect you to act decently."

"Thank you for answering truthfully."

"What is that?" Dr. Drex asked, pointing to the man's arm. There was a sort of engraving or coloring on it. It appeared to form a heart with symbols on a banner wrapping around the design. Three symbols. Cryptic. Definitely unusual.

"I saw that earlier," Joe said. "It appears to have been introduced into the skin via some form of branding device. Alfred's people may brand the sick. He may be carrying a disease and his people cast him out. Is that what happened, Alfred?"

"Or they may have branded him because he was a prisoner," Dr. Drex said. "Perhaps they brand their prisoners where he is from, Joe. Are you able to tell anything from the symbols in your professional capacity as an expert in gangs?"

Joe shook his head. He had never seen symbols like those before. Two symbols were identical, the first and third. The middle symbol looked like a simple circle. The other symbol was like two mountains or hills glued together. Hell, the symbols didn't matter. It was just more conversation, more talk to try to get the man to settle down.

"I'm not sick or a prisoner," Alfred answered, annoyed, his voice losing its edge more and more. He was almost coming back to himself. "It's just a tattoo. Please don't talk about me in the third person when I'm standing right here, Joe. People from my culture brand themselves when they become adults to celebrate manhood and -"

RING! His explanation was interrupted by the sound of a doorbell. The men turned towards the door. Smoke was everywhere and the doorbell kept wringing. RING! RING! RING! Wait! Wait a second! There was no doorbell. Smoke from some kind of grenade quickly filled the room and Alfred passed out immediately. So did Joe and Drex.

"Aaaah...oooooh," Joe murmured, his eyes closed, his conscience slipping away. "This feels all right. I feel goooooood. So smooooooooooth..."

"Feels like I'm riding a horse through a grassy field," Drex muttered. "Go horsy! Go! Take me to the promised land! Go! Go, my sweet stallion! Ride my sweet Arabian!"

Alfred didn't say anything. He was too far gone, his mind enveloped by sleep.

A bit later...

A police station. Drex never reached the promised land. He ended up in a Stamford police station. Dr. Nika Drex, psychology professor at Sacred Heart, a tall, elegant dark-skinned woman with a long, flowing ponytail and high cheek bones, sauntered into the lobby of that police station to meet her husband. Dr. Drex smiled with his puffy cheeks and small eyes while Waikiki Joe blinked and whistled. Dr. Drex was a deathly pale man, hardly attractive, with skin too smooth to be a hard worker and a nervous demeanor that was off-putting to most. It was a mystery how such a man could have landed such a beauty.

"Look at the two of you. Brave men, huh? You both could have been killed. At least this entire Motel situation has been resolved! At least both of you are alive! Thank God. Mr. Phillips is sitting down in that room," Nika said, pointing to the glass. Her fingers were elegant and her voice seductive. "I just talked to him, to this Mr. Phillips. He is in there, wearing a cheap stained suit, ready to tell anyone that knocking my husband out with gas was all part of some sort of master plan to subdue this Alfred fellow. You see, Mr. Phillips is a very tough man. He thinks in terms of subduing people. He thinks in terms of violence like most men. He is also a fool who has no respect for talking someone off the edge."

"He is a smart man, madam," Joe observed. "Sort of a jerk, though. I'll agree with you on that front. At least, that's my professional assessment. He's kind of a jerk, this Phillips. I just met him today and I can't say I like him too much."

“Sir, what was needed here was not so much gas as intelligence and prudence,” she purred attractively. “Only a woman really has those qualities, you know. Intelligence. Prudence. The ability to talk someone down. Men talk about their bravery, their courage – but they are all helpless babies, cowards at heart. It is the woman who dares to cross boundaries, dares to jump into the new without any reservation. The fear of submission drives men to be overly cautious of the unknown, I believe. They react to fear by using brute tactics.”

“And the woman fears no submission?” Dr. Drex asked, his smile twitching. “A beautiful woman like you must fear submission by an evil man, must she not? She must seek the arms of a gentle man. Like me. A soft, feathery type of soul, like a comfortable pillow. I’m your little pillow, baby.”

“Oh brother.” Joe rolled his eyes. Academic types will always lose it when exposed to a beautiful woman. Even when that beautiful woman happens to be their wife. “Spare me. Please, spare me. I can’t hear any more. Stop already.”

“The woman fears no submission because she is expected to submit but spends her life resisting,” Nika said, winking flirtingly at Joe. She was a dedicated, loving wife but that didn’t stop her from appreciating the spell she cast upon most men. “Thus, she is used to fear and consequently fears very little at all. Why don’t the three of us go talk to him, to this Alfred boy? You could use the help of a psychologist on this, I should think. It’s time to use words. Let’s use reason, not violence.”

“You are the best psychologist at Sacred Heart University!” Dr. Drex declared proudly. He was beaming. “If there’s anyone who can get the truth out of someone, it is you, baby. You’re the best psychologist I know!”

Waikiki Joe got up and led the way down the long hallway filled to the brim with offices until he reached the orange metal door leading into the interrogation room. He was followed by Dr. Drex and his wife. When they entered the small room with its padded walls (prisoners had been known to wrestle with officers, bang them into the walls), Phillips was already there, a huge mound of muscle staring across a small table at the man known as Alfred. The African seemed calmer now.

“You know me,” Joe said. “I think you remember me, don’t you?”

“Waikiki Joe,” Alfred responded, his throat scratchy, his eyes bleary. “The great officer who helped me relearn English, or at least calmed me down enough to remember that I already knew it. I’m sorry I pointed a gun at you, sir. I wasn’t myself. I was under the influence of adrenaline, you see. I was panicking.”

“This is Dr. Drex, of course,” Joe continued, waiting before trying to get to the bottom of the events of that day, “and you already met the good Mr. Phillips, I see. He’s big and he bites so watch out. Drex’s wife, Nika Drex, is a psychology professor and is originally from Africa like you, from Sierra Leone I believe. We brought her here because we figured it might make you feel more comfortable to have someone from your continent to talk to, someone who has been through some of the same experiences as you.”

“Pitting Africans against each other? People have tried that for too long, Joe. For too long. It’s time to stop that.”

“Something like that, I guess. But my purposes here are benign, I think.”

“Why did you kill that man in that room?” Nika asked, moving the conversation directly to the point. She didn’t waste any time. “Why shoot him? Why murder someone, taking an innocent life? It seems like an odd thing to do.”

Alfred smiled and looked down at his hands. Phillips began sucking on his teeth, his muscles tensing up as if he was ready to toss the table out of the way, grab his guest, and slam his head into the ground. Waikiki Joe smiled at Alfred reassuringly and then scowled at

Phillips. It wouldn't do to have a show of inappropriate and illegal brute force in front of a lady like Nika Drex.

"Killed him because he came to kill me," Alfred responded. "No other reason than self-defense, Missus. He was there to send me to the next life. I wasn't ready to go, so I resisted and ended up getting the better of the fight."

"Do you live here in Stamford?" Nika inquired. "I've never seen you around. I'm familiar with most members of the immigrant community here, from all kinds of places. I've never seen you here before."

"No, I'm not from here. I live in Miami, Ma'am. I was just up here for a fight, you see. I was just up here to make some money. Never been here before."

"A fight?" Phillips asked, suddenly interested. "A fight, huh?"

"Yes, sir," the African replied. "I was in the hotel room alone because my manager is staying with some friends of his across town. You can talk to him, my manager. I'm in the room and, all of a sudden, this big fool comes into the room with a machine gun, shooting up the place like it was the Fourth of July. There was no reason for it. I got scared."

"Like boxing or something?" Phillips asked. "A fighter? Jeeze Louise. A fighter."

"Jesus," Nika murmured. "Men and their sports!"

"Yeah," Alfred said. "Boxing. I'm a professional, been boxing since I was a little kid, before I could even say my own name, sir. So, I roll out of bed and he comes around the other side to get me. But I've got a kettle bell on the ground -"

"What's a kettle bell?" Joe interrupted.

"You don't know what kettle bell is?" Nika asked Joe. She used them regularly at her gym. She worked out five times a week diligently.

"I don't know either," Dr. Drex interjected. "What's a kettle bell?"

"Of course, *you* don't know," Nika scoffed. Her husband was hardly athletic. "I've never even seen you work out. If you picked up a weight, I'd be afraid your sensitive little back would just give out. You're not the type, Drex."

"I work out," Dr. Drex whimpered. "I've tried it. I've tried it a bunch of times."

Nika gave her husband a slight slap on the back of the head to let him know that his time to speak had expired. Alfred, Phillips and Joe watched the couples spat with interest but then returned their attention to the matter at hand collectively. They had to get to the bottom of this whole thing.

"It's a type of weight for working out," Alfred explained. "I had one on the floor to do some curls with. I threw it at the killer and got him right in the head, right in the forehead. He flew back, sort of dazed, and I jumped up and kicked him in the gonads, grabbed his gun and hit him twelve times or so with the butt of the gun. Hit him over and over and over. I hit him until I couldn't hit him anymore."

"That's what killed him?" Joe asked. "You beat this poor fellow to death, Alfred? Jeeze. Not very nice of you. You bashed his head in? Is that what did him in?"

"No, not at all. That just knocked him out. I tied him up with my jump rope and put my gym bag over his head. Then, I started pacing around nervously. I was quite crazy. Didn't know what was happening. No one had ever tried to kill me before. It was a first."

"Then what?" Phillips said, licking his lips, waiting eagerly for the answer.

"Then," Alfred murmured, "I shot the guy. I don't know why. I just went nuts. Someone called the cops and when you guys showed up I started shooting, speaking Kpelle. I had lost it. The whole thing of having this guy come to try and kill me made me crazy, you see. You can understand that, can't you? You can understand how a young guy like me doesn't want to die and how I could just get all hopped up on adrenaline? That's all it was, fellas. Adrenaline! That's it!"

Waikiki Joe coughed and everybody stopped speaking. Joe reached into his pocket and removed a syringe they had found at the scene of the crime. He placed it on the table. Alfred looked at it with shame and placed his face into his hands. He sat still like that for a few moments. Nika started to walk towards the boy to comfort him but her husband stopped her. Phillips looked at the needle with a smirk.

“How old are you, Alfred?” Phillips asked. “You can’t be more than twenty-three.”

“Twenty-one,” the boy responded. “I’m just twenty-one, sir.”

“Anabolic steroids,” Waikiki Joe said. “I thought they were drugs at first. Smack is what I thought it was, but no. Performance enhancing liquids that will get your juices flowing faster than drinking a whole box full of hot pepper. That’s why you went crazy in the Motel. That’s why you shot up the place like a German soldier invading France. Some guy tried to kill you, you disarmed the poor, incompetent idiot and you went insane because you had taken steroids for your fight. That’s what happened. Wasn’t it, Alfred? Tell me the truth. You were pumped up full of steroids and you killed this poor bastard.”

“Yes,” the boy cried out, tears streaming down his face now. There was no sense in lying anymore. He had been found out. “Yes, sir. I’ve been using this junk for a while now to help me fight. I can’t even explain to you how ashamed I am, sir! I’m a damned fool, an idiot, a loser! I didn’t know this is how it was all going to end up. I didn’t know I was going to kill someone! I didn’t know!”

“A loser,” Phillips repeated, taking out a piece of gum and throwing it into his mouth as he pronounced the word disdainfully. The boy had lost control and killed a man. “Yeah, I used to mess around with that junk myself. Had pimples all up and down my back! I learned from that and became a better man for it. You should try that yourself, Alfred. A little honor and respect never hurt. You should get yourself some honor – and some respect.”

“Terrible,” Nika whispered, visibly perturbed. “Nothing more off-putting than a man dependent on something shot out of a needle. I’ve worked with substance abusers my whole life. I know something about this kind of thing.”

Waikiki Joe rolled his eyes and left the room to go to the bathroom. It was going to be a long day. He felt for the kid. Maybe it was because he was far away from his home too, far from Hawaii. Maybe it was because he felt like a fish out of water most days. Maybe it was just because he didn’t think murderers were that crazy in a crazy world like this one. He could understand taking a guy out. Especially if the guy was really there to kill you.

Later, it was just Joe and Sang in Sang’s office. His real office. Piecing the whole incident together, trying to figure out how to proceed. The episode was the most unusual one they had ever handled, maybe the most unusual one in the city’s history. Things like this just didn’t happen in Stamford. It was a peaceful town.

“The kid has no idea why anyone would try to kill him. No idea at all. He did say that his mother is the President of Liberia, though, and I imagine that had something to do with it. The fellow this kid killed doesn’t look African to me. Dead guy had a Columbian passport on him. We checked with the immigration people and they said the guy’s name is Emilio Rivera and that he arrived on a tourist visa a couple days ago from Cartagena. Kid doesn’t know him at all. This is probably political. That’s the sense I’m getting. Someone his mom ticked off back in Liberia is trying to make a point by taking out her kid.”

The President nodded. Yes, this was Sang’s real office. It was decorated with ships in glass bottles spread out all over the place and fast food wrappers shining like medallions on the desk. Also on that oak desk stood a plaque noting that this was the desk of the Chief of Police. The President was chewing dip, spitting into a fast food soda cup. He just wanted this mess to go away.

“What about the kid himself?” Sang muttered. “Who is this boy? Is he some kind of gang member? Some kind of trouble maker?”

“No, sir. The Alfred boy came to America at eighteen to go to college, it seems. Kid goes to Barry University down in Florida. He’s in the Business School down there. And he’s a fighter, a good fighter, a tough brawler type boxer. He’s an athlete.”

“Jesus,” Sang spat, dip on his chin. “That’s why the kid is all filled up to the brim with this steroid stuff. He’s cheating. He’s a cheater. He’s a boxer who doesn’t fight clean.”

“The kid was up here for a fight, on the undercard. Some guy comes in to kill him because of his mom being someone’s enemy over there in Liberia but the kid gets the best of the guy and leaves the guy dead, starts shooting up the place. That’s what I figure happened. The kid was so hopped up on steroids that he ends up offing the guy.”

“Those chemicals will get you,” Sang observed. “Oh, they’ll make you crazy. Kids are putting every type of chemical into their bloodstreams that they can get. It’s a new era, Joe, a new era.”

“Chemicals are a killer, sir,” Waikiki Joe stated flatly. “Heck, they can produce chemicals for all sorts of things now. They’re everywhere. Chemicals to make your heart stronger, chemicals to fight better, chemicals to make all your problems go away.”

“Steroids,” Sang said nervously. “Yes, that’s a chemical alright, one of the worst ones. Kid is pumped up full of this chemical bouquet. Well, this is a son of a doozy. I could charge the kid with murder because he shot the guy after the guy was all tied up, wasn’t a danger to him anymore. I could do that. I could just charge him with murder.”

“The defense would argue that there wasn’t a sufficient period of time for him to cool down. They’ll say that it wasn’t murder but manslaughter. Now, the kid was on steroids which made him more aggressive anyways. They’ll say he didn’t have the *mens rea*. The defense will get it down to manslaughter. We could charge the kid with murder knowing that the prosecutor will plead it down.”

“That’s a son of a doozy though,” Sang said. “Guy comes in to kill you and you end up getting the best of him and killing him. It’s technically not self-defense because the guy had been tied up but I’ll be a dead rodent if I charge him with a damn thing. Hell, this victim is a shooter brought in from Columbia is the best we can figure out and the kid took him out. Sounds fair to me, Joe. Sounds darn fair, in fact.”

“Tough kid,” Joe said. “Didn’t bow down and take the bullet. Stood up for himself. I would have done the same thing. At least I hope so.”

“Yep,” Sang replied. “Tough kid. Damn kid deserves a medal, chemicals or no chemicals, Joe. Aw hell. Charge him with reckless manslaughter, Joe. The prosecutor will have him plea to aggravated assault or some such junk, sentence the kid to two years at most. The kid’ll get outta jail in less than a year when it comes down to it.”

“Good thinking, Prez,” Joe commented. “That’s about the fairest solution we could have come up with in these circumstances. Charging the kid with murder just doesn’t seem right to me.”

“Yep,” Sang replied. “That’s why I’m the King – and don’t you or anyone else forget it! I’m the King of Stamford! The King, Joe.”

Joe turned around and left the President to rule over the Free World. Kid could have been sentenced to two years just based on possession of a banned substance but everyone likes a guy who takes out his own killers. Even in the 21st century, machismo prevails among a hoard of admiring male monkeys.

2. Our Killers, Warts and All

A.J. smoked his cigarette like a martyr, savoring the sting of the smoke hitting his eyes. Or, more precisely – his eye, since he only had one that worked. He threw a gaze into the open window across the narrow alley. The nice-looking woman was there, showing herself to him, a naked brunette, her hair flowing down her back like a mane of snakes. Her body was wet and she appeared to be singing a song. Something in a gypsy dialect, it almost seemed, but that could be his imagination. Something about the song stirred up uncomfortable feelings in him, images of his mother singing in front of the mirror before her death, before his father had choked her until her eyes popped out.

He adjusted his sights and prepared himself to pull the trigger. He blew out all the breath in his lungs. He flicked his cigarette into the alley. He steadied himself. The split second before you pull the trigger is always the hardest part, as if something holds you back, as if meanness isn't natural but forced. A.J. was getting to the point where it was almost natural, however, and soon the meanness would course through him as naturally as a cell swimming up and down veins in his body.

He had been paid \$75,000 to take this woman out and he wasn't going to fail. He couldn't. It wouldn't be right. His ex-wife needed her alimony and his kids needed braces and schoolbooks. As he prepared himself to strike at his target, he received a telephone call.

"Yeah. What is it woman?"

"Is that how you answer the phone, darling?"

"What do you want? I'm about to earn your alimony right now. You're calling at the worst possible time. That's what I'm doing right this second, earning your money. Why are you calling me? Didn't get enough blood from me the last time you suckled on my neck with those vampire teeth of yours?"

"Don't be late with the alimony! Or else!"

"Whatever, you cheerful soul, you. How are the kids, our special ones, our little bundles of joy? Are they terrorizing the neighborhood?"

"They're alright, smart boy. Your son swallowed some batteries the other day but I slapped him upside the head and he spit them right out. Your little girl is playing videogames. I gave her a big glass of whisky so she should be alright for a while."

"Great. Very funny. You should become a comedian. You're a real natural. Anything else I need to worry about? Pestilence? War? Nuclear explosion?"

"No. Just come through with the alimony. If you don't, then you'll have worse things to worry about. Trust me, smart boy."

"All right. You go someplace real warm now, sweetie, a place filled with sulfur."

"I'm already there, big boy. Bye bye."

"Bye, you evil, soulless succubus, you servant of the devil."

A.J. hung up on his ex-wife and felt an incredible surge of all-encompassing anger pulsate through his muscles, his arms flexing. He checked his sights again but the woman was no longer there. He had missed an opportunity. He cursed himself and proceeded to climb down the fire escape, leaving the rifle behind, muttering about the Red Sox. They hadn't been doing well this season and the thoughts of a sloppy team helped fuel his rage even further. Damn clowns!

Stepping off the fire escape and into the alley, he walked to the fire escape on the woman's building. Sighing, he began his climb, finally arriving at the terrace right outside her window on the third floor. He couldn't see the woman but she was in there somewhere. He pulled his black mask on and drew his brown trench coat tightly around his frame.

Then, he jumped through her window, sending massive shards of glass flying everywhere. He landed near a vanilla bean couch, on a sweet potato carpet, near a cornstalk lamp. Lifting himself up, he brushed off the shards of glass with his leather gloves and drew his pistol from its holster under his left arm.

He heard nothing. He started to call his victim's name softly like a purring cat, but he received no answer. Echoes of himself were all he heard. Crossing the living room, he arrived

at the only other room, his target's bedroom. He placed his head against the door and listened. Not a whisper. Drawing breath, he took a few steps back and prepared himself.

He raced at the door and kicked at the lock, sending the door flying open. He jumped into the room, weapon drawn like a marine invading a fortress. There was no one on the bed. No one near the bedroom windows. No one under the bed. No one in the closet. Where in Josephat's name had this gal gone? He cursed and cursed.

Then, he found her, sitting under her makeup table, holding a Glock 29 that looked eager to spew out some lead buddies. Her eyes betrayed no fear. Her hands were not shaking in the least. This woman had seen things over the course of her life. *Oh Jeeze, A.J. thought, this crazy girl is no joke at all – she knows what she's doing. She has the eyes, the eyes of someone who can pull the trigger. That's not good.*

"Let's just put that gun down," he said, trying to play peacemaker, hoping to buy himself some time to form a plan B. "There's no need for violence here. We can talk about this, we can come to some kind of agreement."

"Says the man who just burst into my apartment with the intent to kill me! I need some information from you. I'll put my gun down but you go first," she replied. She needed to know who was after her. This sort of dame always has many, many enemies.

"That's not the way this works. We put them down at the same time, sweetheart."

"Sweetheart? Not the way this works? It is now!" she retorted, her gaze as firm as a statue of Lincoln. "It is the way it works now, you cockroach, you murderer. It is the way it works. Drop it!"

"I'm not dropping mine, sweetheart. I promise you I won't shoot you if - "

Before he had finished, she had fired and he had fired in response. BLAM. BLAM. Two shots. One landed right in between the girl's dark eyes. The other slammed into A.J.'s chest. He fell to the floor, gasping, his heart beating like a humming bird's wings. Then, he gathered his strength and lifted himself up haphazardly. He threw off his trench coat and slipped off his bullet proof vest. He sniffed the air and realized that he had defecated into his pants when the bullet had hit him.

"I soiled myself," he announced to one in particular. "Damn it to hell. I soiled myself like a twelve-year-old boy. You witch! You made me soil myself I was so afraid!"

He slipped his pants off and proceeded to peruse through the bedroom closet, searching for a pair of pants that could fit him. He was a tall man with a large frame while his victim had been a petite woman. Was there anything there that could fit him?

He suspected that he might have to make his getaway without any pants at all until he happily found a pair of hot pink sweatpants with an elastic band. He proceeded to walk towards the bathroom to wipe off, flushing the toilet paper, and then slipped into his silly pink pants. He gazed at himself in the mirror and felt as emasculated as he had ever felt before. He was a little girl.

"Jeeze, this is like a dream for the police," he whispered with nothing but a corpse to hear him. He did that too frequently, speak with his dead victims. "I made a mess here, blood all over the place, hair, and I even soiled myself. I left the place full of my sweat, my every fluid, like I'm trying to get caught. I'm supposed to be a professional, for Pete's sake! This is a nightmare. A real nightmare. I'll have to burn this place down."

He would have to burn the apartment down. So, he did it. He took a cigarette and lit it, stuck it in his mouth, took few puffs. Then, he threw the cigarette on the carpet and allowed it to simmer. He began to fan it with his hands. Nothing happened. *Damn it to hell, he thought. I'm out of luck. I can't even believe I got myself into this. What the hell was I thinking? Why do I do this line of work if I can't even kill some broad? Why do I kill people if I barely make a real profit doing it? How can I kill people and live paycheck to paycheck? Of course, I'm going to get punished. I'm going to get caught.*

Just then, he saw a bottle of some brown whisky on top of the television in the bedroom. It was located on top of a blue TV tray and the first thing he did was take a big ole swig for himself to calm his nerves. He tilted the bottle of whisky back and let it run down his throat beautifully. Then, he let the liquor fall to the floor, slowly accumulating in a pool near the burning cigarette.

"This isn't going to work in a million years," he said. But then, a huge flame sprung up from the mixture to prove him dead wrong and he had to step back. Like early man, he had created fire. "Guess I was wrong about that. Maybe my luck is changing! It's a new day for me, and I'll drink to that later."

The fire began to spread quickly throughout the apartment and he began to run. He dashed down the hall, down the steps and out of the building to the safety of a tree. He climbed the tree to its upper branches and sat, mesmerized. Flames were shooting forth from the windows of the apartment building like confetti from a New Orleans balcony. He considered running inside to warn the residents but immediately decided against it. That would just get him caught.

His phone began to ring. It was his son.

"Hello daddy," the boy said, his voice full of sadness. "I miss you."

"Damn it, don't call me 'daddy.' Call me 'pops' or 'you old codger' or something like that. Think of something, son. Something creative. Come up with something for me, please. Can you do that my boy? Can you do that for your old man?"

"Hello daddy," the boy said. "I miss you. I miss you a lot."

"You make my heart ache with pain and shrink up inside my chest every time you say that. Do you understand? Do you understand the pain it causes your daddy to hear that? Boy, I'm sitting up in a tree wearing pink pants right now and I'm sad enough. I don't need you to make me any sadder, okay?"

"Okay, daddy. No more sad."

"What do you want? What do you want from me, kid?"

"Bye, daddy."

The boy hung up and the entire apartment building was now on fire. People were jumping out of the windows onto the trees surrounding the property. This would most definitely clean up the mess. But he didn't want *this*. All of these ancillary things always seemed to end up happening.

People jumping out of windows. Falling. Then, he wondered whether there were any kids in the building. Three people had jumped out of the windows so far but no children. Prematurely they had jumped, at the first sound of the fire alarm. Crazies who belonged in a loony bin – most people would have waited a while before jumping through glass. The rest of the tenants were accumulating outside. Everyone appeared to be okay, but it was hard to tell from such a distance, and he didn't really care.

He jumped out of the tree like a mountain lion and ran like a gazelle. He ran several blocks, passing suburban house after suburban house, until he reached his car, parked near the driveway of a white ranch-style home. He looked around before entering his shining black cruiser. It was a bad car, the motor running as smoothly as a Rocky Mountain trail, but he loved it. It was his baby. He stroked the dashboard lovingly. *Yes, he thought to himself, regardless of what is happening out there in the world, here we are just fine – me and you. You will always be here for me, baby. Won't you?* Then, he sped off. He really only loved two things: the time he spent alone driving, with no one else in that car with him to talk his ear off, just driving and watching people from afar like a submarine captain looking out at the sea of fishes; and the sound a human skull makes when it is shattered by lead.

At the apartment, he found his roommate eating at the dinner table without any plates, his long, scraggly beard drooping over his food, contaminating his nourishment. He was a redhead and by Jove he was most definitely a redhead, like the redheads of Yore. His hair shone in the night with the intensity of police lights. He had placed the food - his fancy plate of lasagna – directly upon the wood as if plates didn't even exist. He was also wearing a tutu or some form of costume.

"Why are you wearing that getup?" A.J. asked as he entered the apartment. "You look like a bit nutty right about now. And why are you eating off the table instead of using plates? Have you decided to become some sort of bear or wolf? And why aren't you using utensils? You're eating with your hands and you're making a mess. What is the matter with you?"

"Sorry roomie," his roommate replied, grinning sheepishly. "The getup is for a big performance I'm going to be doing at that old theater right on the Boulevard, you know the

one, the big one over by that massive yuppie bar with the fish tanks. Well, in the piece I play a mental patient who must wear a tutu in order to try to reconnect to his long lost past, to feel connected to his life as a ballet dancer, a life he's forgotten for no apparent reason. It's a type of therapy they're trying these days with amnesiacs at the more experimental nuthouses. The eating without a plate and eating with my hands is my girlfriend's idea. She shared it with me the other day when we were having special moment in our love making, which by the way occurred on that couch here behind us. All of a sudden, we started to cry together as if on cue and she told me that I should really get in touch with nature because modern man was doing himself a disservice by dissecting himself, ripping himself away from his berth. So, she came up with this amazing and fantastic idea where I get to feel more like an animal, more connected to the world, if I eat with my hands and stop using plates and utensils. Animals don't use those things. Why should we?"

A.J. shook his head and walked past his roommate to his own bedroom. He opened the door and walked inside. The worst thing about being divorced is that you had to move out. That means, the woman keeps the place. Yes, that's right. A.J. had been forced out, forced to move out of his own home – the home he had worked so hard to build.

He worked to forget. Every day, he would check his website, searching for potential clients. Most of the time, he received no e-mails. Occasionally, he would receive something brilliant. Someone would offer him a significant amount of money to off someone else. And he would do it. That was it. No big deal. He would meet the other person, pick up the cash and then perform the job and that was all there was to it.

Of course, he would usually wait a while before he met the client, searching the streets for police cars or odd vans. Usually, they had to meet somewhere that had a pool, like at a YMCA. The client would get in the water and he would get in the water. They would swim and then the client would get out of the water and sit down on some benches. He would get up and sit down next to the client. The client would hand him the keys to a locker with the money and the name of the target. Sometimes, the client would give what he needed to know – just a name – right then and there, with a check.

Today, he had no e-mails and he needed money. He needed to get ahead on his bills, stop living like a pauper dependent on his next hit. His partners needed to get paid as well because, for big jobs, he rarely worked alone – it was too dangerous. Sure, he would pick up a job here and there and complete it without assistants, but in this line of work you needed to work with people – and his people were getting antsy! Really antsy! And he couldn't get away from them because they lived right next door like the worst sort of in-laws!

His "in-laws" watched him regularly, like observers documenting the activities of a rare owl. Jennifer was standing at her window, her binoculars pressed up to her sparkling brown eyes. She was tanned – a deep, dark tan – and, at this particular moment, was wearing only a long t-shirt, standing in her living room. Her hair was black, shining in the night and she smelled like roses. Her nails were long.

She saw A.J. standing in his living room talking to his roommate and then move across the apartment and into the bedroom. He was making faces now, lying on the bed. What was he doing? She squinted. Oh, he was doing that. I guess all men have their limitations. She threw the binoculars onto the couch, disgusted.

Then, she proceeded to saunter into the kitchen where Kjawan was waiting for her, wearing only a pair of briefs. She enjoyed their sex on the kitchen floor almost as much as she enjoyed getting enough money to purchase jewels. No. That was a lie. She enjoyed the jewels a heck of a lot more. She also didn't mind the work. Most of the time.

"You see anything?" Kjawan asked. "You see our friend?"

"Yes," she replied. "He's just pleasuring himself like a little boy."

"What is he pleasuring himself to?"

"What do you mean? I don't understand what you mean by that."

"I mean, what is the material he is using to entertain himself with while he is pleasuring himself? Magazines, videos, pictures of old girlfriends?" He had been using a silver spoon to dig into a small yogurt and stopped to wipe his mouth as he spoke. The sort of materials men used to entertain themselves revealed deep truths about them.

“You’re sick. That’s wrong. That’s just wrong. Who pleases themselves to pictures of real people, people you work with, people you know? Old girlfriends?”

“A lot of people do, maybe most people. I used to do it myself, Jenny. My old college girlfriend, the love of my life, dumped me and I used her picture to entertain myself for almost a year and a half. I also used a picture of an old dead aunt of mine, a beautiful old woman I loved.”

“That’s disturbing. I wish you hadn’t said that.”

“Why do you watch that fellow anyway? I mean, we work with him. We’ve worked with the guy for three years now.”

“I work with him but I don’t trust him. I don’t trust him as far as I can throw him. I don’t think I could throw him very far. Do you trust him?”

“I’ve worked with the guy for three years, Jen. He’s never done anything wrong to me. So, I figure he’s an alright guy. I figure he’s decent. Yes, he seems decent enough.”

“He kills people for a living, Kjawan. He’s far from decent. That much I can tell you. No man who takes people’s lives from them for money can be decent.”

“So do we! We kill people. In fact, we help him kill people when he needs the help. That’s the whole reason we live in this neighborhood, baby – so we can be close to him, use his connections. He’s our employer in a sense. We do the same thing he does!”

She walked past him and into the bathroom befuddled. She didn’t trust herself any more than she trusted their partner. Kjawan followed her like a lap dog, strolling into the shower behind her. The water hit their bodies. It was cold at first and then warm. He began to cup and squeeze her breasts, rubbing his nose along her cheek, kissing her neck and drinking the water running down her body. She moaned in approval. They continued like this for some time. He cupped and squeezed and twisted and she gently strummed. They were one.

Eventually, he had her lifted and pressed against the side of the shower, pressed tightly against the tiles. He thrust into her and she squealed in delight. He continued until her body started to quiver and then finally droop down in his arms. Then, he stopped, almost as if it was an act of mercy. If he kept going, they might end up loving each other.

“You know, Jenny, I could have been one of the greatest batters in the history of the game. I really could have. I could have been the greatest baseball player ever.”

“You’re all right, sweetie. We’re doing what we have to do to survive.”

“I hope you’re right. I really do. A sick side of me says that I’m going to go to Hell, that I should just get a real job like any other man. What am I doing? What’s the point of living on the edge like this?”

They were staring at each other in the shower stall. For all that staring, it was hard for them to read each other. She couldn’t imagine herself in his shoes. He couldn’t believe that she had real emotions. They really knew very little about each other.

“What? And serve fries at a fast food place for minimum wage? We’ll pray together later as a couple. We’ll pray for a better life, for forgiveness. God forgives all people, regardless of what they do. He’ll forgive the two of us. Have faith in that.”

“Someone has to take responsibility, Jenny.”

She pause and gazed into his eyes as she said: “Let it be someone else.”

Then, she walked out of the shower, the steam following her. As she dried herself off using the brown towels on the rack, she thought of her neighbor. What a strange man! He was almost like a ghost of an old Civil War field marshal with his trench coat. The way he walked, it was so awkward. It was as if he was made of water shaped into a man.

She had met him years ago, in Iraq, in a small village on the border. He had been assigned to kill one man and she had been assigned to kill another. Their paths had crossed and then- like magic – they had formed a professional connection, like two defective wolves staring at each other in the frozen tundra. She remembered the day well...

Years before...

“Why are you here?” the dusty American man asked her, his deep-set eyes and firm smile comforting her, reminding her of home. They were sitting in a bar with walls of mud, surrounded by humble men and women staring at them unceasingly, unblinkingly. They were all too afraid to look away, afraid that something was going to happen.

"A mission," she replied. She was a beautiful woman. A beautiful woman in Iraq with cuts over her lips and bruises on her face. A beautiful woman in Iraq was either a helpless victim or the wife of someone rich, a sort of domestic slave – but she was neither. In fact, she was the farthest from those two things one could be. There was a sharp deadliness to her features, as if her biology had made her vicious. Her nose was small and firm, her cheekbones feminine but stern and her eyes betrayed a shifting color.

"The men in this village don't come up to you," the American killer observed. "That is very rare. I wonder how you created such a reputation for yourself. You must have done something. You must have done something big."

"They'd be fools to try to approach someone like me, someone with my *credentials*," she retorted, emphasizing the last word with a smile. Her gun was in her hand and her suit was covered with blood, but it wasn't her blood. She kept her hand on that gun, resting on the table, ready for action. A.J. had a feeling that she'd held onto that gun for a long, long time, decades or centuries. She could have been born holding that pistol.

"Why don't you just relax?" he asked, pointing to the gun.

"I'm perfectly calm," she replied. "Your suit is nice and clean."

"I don't make messes. I'm very neat."

"How many?"

"Three rich idiots who crossed the wrong people. You?"

"Just one, but he was hard to get to. I ended up having to go through a lot of men."

Their conversation was interrupted by Brahms and A.J. reached into his front pocket to produce a cellphone without averting his eyes. He listened intently and then closed the phone and put it away, back into his pocket, next to the severed thumbs of the men he had retired. They sat in silence, staring at each other for a few more seconds. Then, he told her he had to go, his ride was coming. She nodded and told him that it had been nice meeting him. He walked out of the bar, leaving a card on the table.

That had been the first time they had met.

"You think he's crazy?" Jenny asked Kjawan. "You think our partner over there is nuts? I mean, he's a little off, right? A little mad?"

"Yeah," Kjawan replied. They were lying in bed together, holding each other now. There was no love shared between them but the sort of comfort one feels wearing an old shoe or looking at a nice painting hanging in a living room for years.

"That makes the two of us crazy, doesn't it? Only crazy people can work with another crazy person. If he's nuts, so are we. We're both as crazy as he is."

"Probably. We probably are crazy. You know anything about him, I mean really?"

"How come we always end up talking about him every night? I know nothing and that's the answer I give you every day. Just where he lives and not much more at all. Same as you. Oh, and last year, we had a job. A child molester. Some guy who had been raping small children if I recall. The parents of one of the victims wanted the guy dead, so we took care of it. He needed me for that one. It was before I had met you. We kill the guy and we drive away and he's in the car, crying like a little baby."

"Crying? Like a little girl? Really crying, tears and all?"

"Bawling his eyes out. I really can't remember the guy's name, the guy we killed. He didn't know him, though. He just broke down and started choking on his own tears, gulping them down. I honestly think the guy might have been abused when he was a kid. Something might have happened to him. That would explain why he's so crazy, so violent, so eager to pull the trigger, so resistant to any planning."

"That would explain a lot, but the truth is we don't need any explanations."

There was a knock at the door. Jenny and Kjawan started. The latter reached into the nightstand drawer and drew a gun. He walked towards the door slowly, prepared to fire. He crouched down and shouted: "Who is it? Do you know what time it is, man?"

"I do. I know exactly what time it is. It's A.J. Open up."

"I'm opening up the door. Just wait a little bit."

Kjawan, wearing only a pair of boxer shorts, pointed to the nightstand and Jenny, wearing a pair of pink pajamas, jumped out of bed and walked to the drawer. Reaching into

the same nightstand drawer Kjawan had reached into to produce the pistol, she found another handgun. She crouched down and walked to the door. Kjawan stood on one side of the door and she stood on the other side.

"I'm letting you in," Kjawan said. "You know the drill, A.J. Same as every time you come over. No sudden movements."

"I know," A.J. replied. "We've done this enough times. I'm quite ready. Trust me."

Kjawan unlatched the three locks and slowly opened the door as Jenny stood ready for any trouble. A.J. walked into the room with his hands placed behind his head. Kjawan patted him down carefully, inspecting every nook and cranny within reason.

"You done?" A.J. asked as the other man backed away. "You're more paranoid than usual tonight. The pat down felt a little longer. I do something?"

"Yes," A.J. replied. "You came over unannounced and you almost never do that. Come on in. Make yourself at home."

There was a small grey table with black foldout chairs. A.J. sat down at the table, followed by Kjawan and Jenny. A.J. reached into his front pocket, produced a cigarette pack and began to pull out a cigarette.

"No smoking," Jenny reminded him.

A.J. produced a lighter and lit the cigarette, blowing the smoke in her face. They stared at each other. Jenny rolled her eyes and Kjawan whistled in disapproval. A.J. was in a bad mood.

"I need a big hit. Something serious." A.J. announced, smiling peevishly.

"You're the one who arranges all the hits," Kjawan observed, pointing a finger at the other man. "If it wasn't for that, we wouldn't need you. You established the connections with the right people. You control all of this. We can't help you with that."

"I know," A.J. stated simply. "I know. Trust me."

They sat in silence. A.J. seemed to be whispering to himself with his eyes shut. When he opened his eyes, he said nothing. He threw them a smile and continued smoking.

"What kind of hit are we looking for?" Jenny asked, throwing Kjawan a look that said it all: *This guy is crazy and he's going to end up putting both of us into a coffin.*

"Something government or big business," A.J. explained. "No more favors for the sons and daughters of contributors to campaigns. No more petty hoods. No more cheating wives or girlfriends. No more mistresses who could ruin chances of reelection. We need money. We need serious dough, here. I'm talking big bucks."

"You looking to get out of the game?" Jenny inquired.

A.J. laughed.

"No," he chuckled. "I'm never leaving the game. I love it too much. I'll do this for the rest of my days, until I die. At least until someone kills me – which might be sooner rather than later. I feel the meanness coming strong now. Feels like it's taking hold. Who knows? Maybe it'll happen on this mission – I'll leave all of this sentiment in me behind."

"Then why the need for such a big job? Big jobs carry big risks." Jenny looked into A.J.'s eyes but she saw nothing but surface. A smile. Expressionless eyes. It was as if he wasn't even there at all.

"Because I'm not some small-time hoodlum and I need to get ahead with all my bills. We're better than this. You guys know that we're better than this petty stuff – heck, I just killed a lady today because she was sleeping with a wealthy woman's husband. That's not the type of hit we should be doing. I live in an apartment with a roommate and you live in the worst house on the block. I made \$350,000 last year and each of you made \$200,000. In this country, we can barely spend our money. We have to look over our shoulders. Most of our money goes to waste. We spend half of what we make just moving our money, laundering it like dirty sheets. In the end, we don't live the types of lives we should be living, not the high life I'd imagined. What I want to do is simple. I want to make enough money to leave this city behind, move to Africa. We can live cheaply in Luanda and go about our business without fear of being arrested."

"Luanda?" Jenny asked. "Africa?"

“Luanda,” A.J. replied. “We each get a mansion over there and work without any interruption. We take our business to the next level. Go on big contracts all over the world. We stop this nickel and dime bullshit.”

“No more hits like that pedophile hit Jenny was telling me about,” Kjawan said, observing A.J.’s reaction to that reference. A.J. became a statue. There was no reading him. Was he upset? Was he happy? Was he just thinking about the weather? It was impossible to say. He did seem slightly perturbed.

A.J. nodded. And smiled.

Jenny smiled back and walked out of the room, leaving Kjawan and A.J. to stare at each other. They examined each other, pondering each other’s features. A.J. had a bright blue eye and yellowish hair. Yet, there were traces of an unorthodox heritage in him. His skin was tanned and his neck as thick as a bull’s. Kjawan had sharp features himself. He was muscular but thin, the same as the other man.

Jenny returned to the room carrying a wooden box. She placed it on the table and opened it, producing a small sheet of tinfoil and a glass tube. She also produced a candle attached to a candlestick, using a lighter to ignite the wick. She placed the lit candle on the middle of the table and placed a small amount of powder on the tinfoil. Holding the tinfoil over the candle and the glass tube in her mouth, she inhaled the smoke. Passing the tinfoil around the table, they repeated the procedure numerous times.

Jenny walked to the stereo and turned it to the jazz music station. Good old fashioned radio, she muttered. She had chosen the public channel, a sort of yoga-music-hippie-new-age-rain-sounds kind of mix of jazz. The room eased into a well-lit paradise and she disrobed. This was their ritual every time. They would discuss business, come to a resolution, and then – chaos.

They made love, the three of them. She wondered whether they minded at all, two naked men with the same woman. The first time, she had suspected that they might be nervous about the whole thing. The idea of it – two men and a woman like a sandwich. But they paid no attention to each other and focused on her. They massaged her shoulders and kissed her body, sharing her without violence. Sometimes, they would take turns, one climbing onto her while the other watched in silence before changing positions. She never let them abuse her or get overly aggressive.

In the end, they would sit on the apartment floor naked, gazing at each other, wondering what the other was thinking. They had all made love dozens of times, but not one could understand the other. And trust – trust was dead. Actually, it had never existed and could never be produced. Not among them.

A short time later...

“You really think we can make it to the big time with this?” she whispered.

“I think so,” A.J. whispered back. “I know we can. We *can*.”

He was dressed now, walking out the door. He nodded to Kjawan and closed the door behind him, walking back across the parking lot and across the street to his apartment building. His roommate was still up, wearing only his underwear, staring devotedly at the television while playing with a game controller. He would kick up with his socks occasionally as the graphic character on the screen slipped and dodged through danger.

A.J. walked to his room and shut the door behind him. He sat on his bed and reached into his coat pocket to gaze at the picture. He liked to pull it out sometimes, to think about the past only occasionally. There was his father with his pipe, his hand placed on his shoulder. The pastor. The most respected man in the entire little town in the middle of nowhere.

He put the picture back into his pocket and pondered his dilemma. He required a big job, one big enough to make a move. He had to do it, to get out of this country, go where there weren’t the same restrictions, the same watching over your back incessantly, constantly afraid that a policeman is going to break down your door and handcuff you. Say what you will about the law, only a fool can ignore it as if the police were some mere apparition.

He lit a cigarette and stared at it. Did anyone else smoke anymore? No, not anyone. Is that why each pack cost him an arm and a leg? It seemed like everyone these days was only concerned with surviving, with trying to pay the bills amidst the worst sort of recession.

"It's all going to fall apart," he said to himself, staring into space, reciting his journal entry from the previous day. "Every single little bit of it all. The entire pyramid. They can't hold it together. We can't live like this, going and going as if the maze had some cheese at the end of it. At some point, it has to stop and we have to realize that the cheese doesn't exist. It has to stop. But the wheels keep turning and we keep going round and round, just running like distraught gerbils. Until it all ends. To the end."

His cell phone rang.

"Yeah? Who is this?"

"You don't check your website anymore, big boy?" It was a man with a thick Russian accent. He sounded fat. "I wanted to know if you can put in an order of flowers for me. I could use some nice roses. Some nice flowers."

"How did you get this number? The number isn't on the website. How did you find out about me, mister?"

"We have a mutual friend. A Mr. Singh. Robert Singh."

Robert Singh was the codename for Dan Wentworth, his connection into the international assassination community. He had first met Dan Wentworth years before, when he had been initiated into the business for the government. They had put him in contact with Israeli secret police and from there A.J. became a known quantity. They knew he could pull off the jobs. So they had started calling him, asking him to perform small contracts. People who had hurt other people, people who knew too much, or people who were just plumb disliked or too dumb to know to keep their heads down.

Now, he was thirty-four years old. It was time to move on, time for bigger things.

"When can we meet in person?" A.J. asked. "I like to meet my customers to make sure I take all the details of each order personally. The worst thing a person can ever be confronted with are flowers that don't match their personality, their specific tastes. I like to make sure I do my job just right. It's hard running a flower business, real hard."

"Well, why don't you tell me? I don't want to impose. I know it is hard running a business in this economy with everything crashing down all around us. You tell me when you are available. I'll bow to your convenience, my friend."

"Tomorrow, eleven o'clock. Meet me at Grady Lake Park. You drive into the Park, go directly to the lake. It's a small lake with picnic tables. There is a small red house, a cabin, the only one near the lake. Head towards the cabin after you park the car. Go to the third table to your right. I'll be sitting there with a white t-shirt and jeans, wearing a blue baseball cap."

"I'll be there wearing a red t-shirt and a fedora hat."

"A fedora hat? Someone likes to play Mr. Stylish. You a fashionable type, sir?"

"Just be there tomorrow, wise guy," the man grunted. "Don't be late."

Then, there was only the sterile sound of a dial tone. The guy sounded like a heavy hitter. A.J. could tell from the voice. That could only mean one thing – he had to make sure the job was done right.

He knocked on their door again and they were still up, of course, wired. It was Kjawan who answered the door. This time, they had been careless. Unlike before, they hadn't gotten their firearms and prepared themselves for him. They were too lit up to follow their own procedures and A.J. felt like killing them for it. They were amateurs, unfit to work with a professional like himself.

"We have a job, I think," he said simply. He didn't like to let the disdain show in his tone. "A job that fits our needs. It's like the deity answered my request. Perfect timing. Sometimes the Great Spirit actually answers prayers."

"A big job, like the one we wanted?" Kjawan murmured, biting his lower lip, not believing the coincidence. "Just like that? One minute we're talking about it and here it is? Seems impossible. Doesn't seem real."

"Maybe, but I'll need you and Jenny to cover me. I need backup with this one."

"The usual armaments?"

"Sniper rifles. The meeting is at eleven, so you should get there around nine thirty, wander off into the woods and catch sight of the usual picnic table, the one I like to use. Keep your sights on the man. He sounds like a foreigner, a big guy from what I can tell from his

voice. Anything happens, you and Jenny take him out. Don't let him reach for anything or make any sudden moves."

The other man nodded and A.J. turned and left. He wandered about the streets, lighting cigarette after cigarette. Maybe he smoked because he hoped it would ultimately kill him. Maybe that's why he just ended up charging into most jobs, even when he tried to make a plan – he just didn't care. He didn't stick to plans.

So, he smoked, hoping for death. The pastor had died from cigarettes. Sort of. He had been helped a little as far as getting himself onto the road to Heaven or Hell, wherever he ended up. A.J. smiled. No, the pastor, his old man, was definitely burning in Hell. No good deity would have accepted such a man, a man who could do such things to his wife and child.

A.J. stopped in front of a bar where there was a man with long gray hair playing a black piano. Chopin. The man was playing Chopin with his eyes closed, absorbed by the music. The bar was lit by a yellow light which spread over the wood counters, draping itself over reddish hairy arms and stubbly chins planted on the gentle knuckles of middle-aged professionals.

These were the lawyers and doctors. The martini, play golf on Sunday crowd. They wore long-sleeved shirts tucked into kakis. Their hair was neatly combed. He was sure that they smelled of facial soap and laundry detergent mixed with shaving cream and hair dye. They spoke in platitudes.

He sat next to a blond man who threw him a flirtatious look, so he furled his brow and ordered a whisky on the rocks. The man playing Chopin kept playing with his eyes closed. The crowd was getting rowdier – as rowdy as a crowd like this can get, which isn't too bad. A group of businessmen were shouting in a far-flung corner of the establishment.

"You come here much?" the blond man asked him.

"No, I don't," he replied.

"You live nearby?"

"It's none of your business where I live, pal."

"Just trying to make conversation."

"Well, your conversation needs to go off to some other side of this bar, because I'm not interested in talking to you. So, get your ass off the seat next to me and go somewhere else, or I'll crack you in the jaw. I'll crack you real hard, buddy, send your teeth flying out of your fucking face!"

The blond man turned away and A.J. felt the joy of a moment of silence. But the blond man didn't stop there. He got up off his seat and walked over to the bartender, a six-foot-three man weighing at least two-hundred-and-forty-pounds, all muscle, no fat. The bartender walked over to him and stared at him for a few moments before speaking. He was fortyish but his battered face set him apart from his clientele.

"You got a problem with my friend over there?" the bartender asked, nodding towards the blond man. "You know who he is? He's the top real estate developer in this town. Who are you? Your clothes tell me that you aren't much, at least not in terms of money. You sure you can afford your drinks here?"

"You got something you want to say me, Mr. Wrinkles? Your face tells me you've been around but those gray hairs and those bags under your eyes tell me you're a little too slow to fight a man like me."

"Is that right? Is that your educated opinion, jerkoff?"

"If you want to fight me because I told some clown who was hitting on me to piss off, then you deserve what you're gonna get."

"This is a gay bar!" the blond man yelled from across the bar.

"Why don't you pay and get out?" the bartender asked.

"You don't know what you're missing!" the blond man shouted.

"Pay and get out!" the bartender repeated.

A.J. reached into his wallet and removed a twenty dollar bill. He slapped it onto the counter and pushed it over to the bartender. Then, he walked over to the blond man and punched him in the face. The blond man covered his mouth with a hand and the entire place was staring at them. All the surrounding conversations had stopped.

The piano player had stopped playing. His eyes were open.

The businessmen had stopped gesticulating.

A.J. nodded to the bartender as he walked out of the bar, slamming the door behind him. He walked into the night humming to himself until he saw a stray cat. It was playing with a mouse in an alley. It was batting the mouse back and forth, torturing it.

“You like that mouse?”

The cat hissed, warning him to stay away.

“I asked you a question. You like that mouse, huh?”

The cat hissed again.

A.J. pulled out his pistol and fired a shot, striking the cat. He grinned as he ran back to his place and the sound of the shot reverberated through the night air. He had taken yet another life and that gave him an immense amount of pleasure, an indescribable amount of pleasure. Soon, he would be on his way to Africa, to dominate and kill bigger prey.

The next day, as the promising deal finally materialized...

The man was so pale that it made A.J. wonder whether he was a corpse resurrected for the purposes of contracting his services. The fellow had a bluish undertone to him, just like a dead body. His breasts sagged down to the ground and were as large as a woman's breasts and his turkey neck led up to two large skin purses glued tightly to the sides of his face, giving him the appearance of a defective Basset Hound. His teeth were tobacco-stained, yellow, twisted. The man was smiling like a hyena.

“I guess you smoke too, huh?” A.J. asked. “It's like looking into the mirror and seeing my own future. Look at those tar-stained teeth! I can't believe that's how I'm going to end up. It's fucking depressing.”

“What the hell you talking about, pal? Are you crazy?” The Russian asked in his silly accent. He had a gold chain, and at least one gold tooth that shone like a Hollywood spotlight. His nails were overgrown like weeds and he was as bald. “You some kind of freak? A weirdo or something?”

“Your teeth,” A.J. repeated. “You have smoker's teeth. You have the teeth of a man who has smoked his entire life. My pops had teeth like that. Good old fella, my pops.”

The man gazed at him funny, wondering whether to proceed. Then, he shook his head and mumbled something to himself in Russian. You met all types of crazies everywhere in this world. In terms of the murder business, however, crazy could be good. Really good.

“Let us begin,” the man began, his voice tortured, confused. “I did what you ask. I take my clothes off for you. What you want now? What's the next step?”

“We are going to go into the lake. Go into the lake.”

“Are you crazy? I don't even know your name. Who are you?”

“Just call me Flower Man. What do I call you? You have a name?”

“You can call me the Customer.”

“That's a beautiful name, but you still have to get in the water. Get going, pal.”

A.J. took off his cap and t-shirt. He pulled down his jeans, revealing a bright blue bathing suit and motioned for the man to follow him into the water. The Customer was only wearing polka dotted boxer shorts. His belly hung over the shorts like a sack on a peasant's back or a seal lying on the edge of the ice.

“If you told me, I would have worn bathing suit,” the man complained, his voice winy, like the needle on a vitrola running across the grooves.

“I'm sorry about that. I truly am.”

“This water is going to be very cold, brother. Very cold.”

“Yes, it is,” A.J. agreed without slowing his pace. He kept going into the middle of that pond. It was more of a pond than a lake, really.

The Customer sighed and they floated into the waters of the pond. The pond was covered with a sort of black film, as well as unidentifiable biological muck. Dirt of all colors seemed to be floating on the surface on top of wet branches. The Customer could see a metal pipe pumping sludge into the water.

“This lake is disgusting,” the Customer said. “It smells like pollution and strange chemicals. I feel like I could mutate into an alien duck just by standing in here. Why you take me here? I hate this place. A man like me doesn't belong in a pond like this.”

"It's the only place I know for sure that you won't be wearing a wire."

"Trust me," the Customer chuckled, his voice dripping with the self-assurance of a man who has murdered too many people. "With the type of folks I'm here to represent, I would be killed if I were wearing a wire. They would shoot me dead. You see, my friend, I am here to represent the interests of a very exclusive group, a sort of upper stratum. I don't need to tell you who they are, but you might meet some of them – hell, you might not. I don't know. I just need to know whether you are truly up to the task that I am here to talk to you about today. It's a tough task."

"What's the task, friend? How can I tell you if I'm up to something when I don't know what that something is? That's like asking my opinion about a painting without showing it to me. I need to see the damned painting."

"The task, pal? It's not that little stuff that you have been doing, that's for damn sure. It isn't a safe job. It is very dangerous. But the potential risks might outweigh the rewards depending on your point of view, of course, my friend. You see, this job involves taking out a political figure. A somewhat famous one. The name of the figure is Ellen Hawthorne. She is the first female president of the nation of Liberia. Have you heard of her? Ellen Hawthorne?"

"No, I haven't heard of Ellen Hawthorn. Why do you want her dead, this poor woman? What did she ever do to you?"

"That is none of your concern, pal. The job is no different than any job you have ever performed before. Liberia is a very small nation with less than four million people and their capital, Monrovia, has less than one million residents. The presidential palace is guarded but it is nothing too difficult to get through, should it come to that. You should take her out, outside the palace, if you can."

"Why me? Why not some other killer?"

"Mr. Dan Wentworth, codename Mr. Singh, recommended you. He said that you regularly pull off jobs for him, for his friends, and that you would be just perfect for this kind of work. It is a simple job, really. Once you get to Liberia, you will meet a contact and the contact will provide you with sniper rifles. Ideally, you would wait until she goes to her Church on Sunday. She gets into a limousine, surrounded by four armed men on motorcycles. Shoot in her head then."

"Is she usually followed by other armed guards? Can we expect trouble?"

"No. I'm told that she goes to church just with the four men on motorcycles guarding her and no one else. I'm also told that the driver carries a pistol, a big one, so try your best to be careful. Shoot her and get on the first plane out of the country. Move fast. Piece of cake."

"How much? How much money can I expect from this job?"

"Six million dollars. Is that enough for you?"

A.J. whistled.

It was a done deal.

"It's a done deal," he said. "You better believe it, my friend. It is a done deal."

He found Jenny and Kjawan sitting behind bushes on the dirt like Vietcong waiting to attack French or American troops. She was wearing jeans and white high top sneakers and he was wearing a black t-shirt and black dress pants. They had already packed up their sniper rifles by the time he had arrived. Their black cases sat behind them.

"Does the job look good?" Kjawan asked. His beady eyes were focused.

"Looks damn good," A.J. replied. "The money's good. Too good, maybe. I don't think I've ever come across money like this before."

"Who's the target?" Jenny inquired, skeptical. "Must be a real bad son of a gun. They don't pay six million dollars for the head of a school teacher. A killer, someone who did a hit on someone else?"

"I don't think so. Ellen Hawthorne is the target. That's her name – Ellen Hawthorne. She's the President of Liberia, you see. To do the job, we would have to go there, set up shop at a Hotel and then attack her limousine as she's going to Church on Sunday. She's usually accompanied by four armed men on motorcycles and the driver is armed with a big pistol. Seems simple enough. Doesn't it?"

“What are the guards armed with?” Kjawan asked, doubting the possibility of such an easy job. This crew was not used to blessings. “They’re not going to pay us good money to take out an easy target. These guys must be professionals armed to the teeth. This is going to be bloody. This must be a high-risk job.”

“They are armed,” A.J. said. “Most of them are ex-CIA, I’m guessing. They’ll be wearing bulletproof vests, I’m almost sure of it. Listen, we’re not sure on the details but this thing isn’t going to be easy. That’s for sure. Word is that someone tried to take out her son and the hit-man ended up in a body bag.”

“So, we’re talking high risk,” Jenny observed. “A really high risk. I mean, we could fail here if these guards are good. We could end up dead. Liberia is awfully far. We’d stick out like sore thumbs.”

“High risk, high reward. We’re talking six million dollars. Not a small job.”

“We have to do it!” Kjawan exclaimed.

“It’s the real deal here guys. This is exactly what we needed. Exactly what we needed. Seems weird, right? I come to see you guys about this desire for a change in our lives and here we are, less than twenty-four hours later. A change. This is the opportunity. It’s like its fate. This is fate.”

“I don’t believe in such a thing as fate,” Jenny stated in an emotionless hum. She didn’t believe in anything, really. Never had a religion. “I believe in making your own luck in this world. This is no easy job. Can we take her out with a roadside bomb? An explosive device of some kind?”

“The car will be guarded,” Kjawan shook his head pessimistically. “We’d never be able to get to the car to put the explosive inside it. For us to plant a bomb in the road, like a mine, we’d have to be able to purchase one over there – and we’d have to hope one of her guards don’t ride over it first with their motorcycles.”

“And we’d have to hope a wheel strikes the device,” A.J. added. “The car could drive around a mine like that. If we tried to plant an explosive and detonate it from afar, we’d have to have an explosive powerful enough to destroy the entire car. That could be tough to find somewhere like Liberia.”

“We still wouldn’t be sure that the blast really killed her,” Jenny said. “She could survive and it would all have been for nothing. We have to make sure she’s dead to get the money. The only way to do that is -”

“To put a bullet in her head,” A.J. said, interrupting her.

They sat in silence. There was no sense at all in flying to Liberia, blowing up a car only to have the target pull through somehow. No, they had to be certain. The target had to be shot at close range enough times that there was no way that she could possibly pull through.

Mere hours later...

A.J., Jenny and Kjawan sat Indian style on the floor of Jenny and Kjawan’s apartment, staring intently at a laptop computer streaming a documentary. The topic was Ellen Hawthorne, the great female hope of a poor, war-torn people. The film showed young men and women missing limbs and eyes, parts of their bodies cut away from them by angry child soldiers. Their eyes had been cut out of their faces by the progeny of some mad man former dictator seeking a return to power. The narrator was a prissy British fellow from the BBC, the sort of man who always seemed to be chosen to talk about such inspirational world stories.

Ellen Hawthorne was born in a rural village here in Liberia. Neither her father nor her mother knew how to read. Out of her sixteen brothers and sisters, five lived to adulthood. Of those five, three are still alive. Her brother is a shepherd and her sister is a housewife – neither of them can read or write.

Astonishingly, Ellen Hawthorn graduated with a law degree from the University of Liberia and practiced law in Monrovia for several years. She was somehow able to survive the multiple civil wars striking this country, one of the poorest in the region. She is celebrated as a true symbol of hope in Liberia, a nation without a printed national newspaper. Her reign has not been without its share of problems, however, as demonstrated by the relatively recent assassination attempt on her son, Alfred Hawthorne, in Connecticut. The boy survived the

assault after killing his would-be assassin but was charged with a crime. The prosecutors ultimately dropped all charges against him after a massive protest led by American progressive groups. The boy has refused to return home to Liberia, preferring life in the United States of America.

“Jesus,” Jenny whispered. “They already tried to kill this lady’s son. Now, they’re going after her. Poor lady. This poor lady’s had some real bad luck in life.”

“Real, real bad luck. Especially since she is going to die,” her boyfriend lamented. He didn’t care. He had killed children, old women, and families. “Heck, we’re going to be the crew who kill her. There’s no worse luck than that. We’re the best there is!”

They were all silent after that, imitating emotional engagement, pretending they felt sad. Jenny didn’t believe that they were the best. They were insane. If they were a normal hit crew, they would make plans, strategize so that they could survive, retire eventually. They never made plans for their hits. Everything seemed to be random. They just charged in and shot everyone they saw like mad dogs, prepared to devour the whole world. That was no way to live your life, always facing some unknown dawn.

3. Alfred Hawthorne

The room was dark, as if barely lit at all despite the flashing lights of cameras and the outlines of neon signs. He stared up at the skies, expecting to see stars staring back, but all he saw were wooden beams and hay molded together into a single entity. The crows were all shouting around him, a mad swab of screaming faces with hungry smiles and foxlike squinty eyes that seemed to pop out. He strapped his wraps tighter around his hands, biting down on the straps with those huge, angry white teeth of his. He was free now. Freedom comes from knowing you have no choice at all.

There was nothing he could do to avoid the oncoming blood bath. He had to stand up for himself, make sure that they understood that he wasn’t just going to bow down. And so he did the only thing fate allowed him to do, stretching his muscles, kicking his arms out like a wild horse – ready to strike. There was only the hovering cloud of a distinct feeling that the melancholy of his days of had to be interrupted with these brief moments of intensity. There could be violence, there could be death in life, but there could be no dishonor. His internal tough guy, never quit framework would not accept that.

Looking across the way at the other man (his name was unimportant, really), he felt only the desire to impose his will upon that other being, to show that other figure he meant business. There was no beating a man like Alfred Hawthorne. Never. Not under any circumstances. He had suffered too much in this life to give up.

So, he tightened his wraps with his teeth once again, whispering a silent prayer in between his fingers, letting the air slip past his phalanges. Then, he dove right in at the bell, wearing gloves now, his arms flailing with the knowing self-confidence of a man possessed, striking the other man’s sides. His opponent blocked the strikes with his arms and moved to the left. Alfred cursed: “Why can’t I hit this guy? Damn it to hell! *Damn it!*” The audience could hear nothing because the curses were written in invisible breath, a psychic cursing, unspoken but understandable to his enemy.

He moved in. Jumped in, really. He was an African tiger, a conquering moor. Yes, he said to himself under his breath as he dove forward – he was an invader storming the castles of Europe. He began to toss his arms wildly, a lunatic turned into a wolf-man by the electric moon. His arms kicked forward from the left and then the right again, hoping to get the other man with a flash knockout. He slid into a jab with his right arm. He kept dancing, slipping and ducking back to his left under trans-versing fists.

It was that time – that special millisecond, that point where you throw caution to the wind. So, he slipped back in like a fish swimming upstream, dodging the oncoming traffic

before leaping out of the water. He jumped forward and struck the man's chin, sending him coursing through the air. And then Alfred bounded in with another straight right (the other man had given him the time to jump back and then jump back in).

"Oh Jeeze," he said to himself, stepping back, watching the other man fall. A face spurting out blood slowly, slowly leaning back. He saw the man's hair flying about, heard the man's neck snap back (it was a loud sort of screech, like a weasel squeezed in a vice, like a screeching woman leaning out a window in a trailer park about to be struck by a hurricane) – smack! – and then the man disappeared like tobacco smoke. No, he hadn't disappeared. He had just crashed to the canvas. Yes, the other man was just spread out on the canvas covered in blood, his teeth wrecked beneath that mouthpiece.

Alfred wanted to leap forward again but the referee waived him off and he retreated back to his stoop to sit and be watered like a calf. Insufferable moments passed. The figures moved slowly through his field of vision. They were smudges. Blots who would decide his future in this division. The judge waived him over.

His semi-dead opponent, teeth hanging out, had been somehow resuscitated and brought forward. His hand was being held. He was stooped over, his shoulders hunched. There was no way this man could ever beat him again. He had been broken. The judge walked over to Alfred and lifted his hand. He had won.

"Alfred Hawthorne! Alfred Hawthorne is our winner, ladies and gentlemen!"

He had established himself as a contender, the man to beat – and the crowd seemed to know it and went wild! They erupted into cheer, clapping, chirping like chickens. Alfred looked over at a fat, pale man with reddish hair leaning back in his seat, his hands tucked under his arms to form chicken wings. He had probably lost money on this fight. Most had expected him to lose.

So, Alfred shrugged his shoulders and smiled for the cameras like a good boy. They didn't know. The struggles of a boxer. How could they know about what he went through every time? What are they but the loud spectators of a drama unfolding before them, a papyrus scroll unrolled for their amusement? Cell against cell? Blood against blood? Fist against fist? They knew nothing about those things. They were the ignorant masses who believed Africans jumped about in the jungle with spears as opposed to dying in disease-infested cities ruled by dictators on corporate payrolls.

"Do you have anything to say about this fight, Mr. Hawthorne?"

"He fought hard, he fought hard! Like a Roman Warrior, a real Italian killer, and he'll be back. No doubt about that. No fighter goes out and refuses to come back. He fought a fantastic fight and I have a great deal of respect for him!"

"Do you have any message for this crowd gathered here to watch you today?"

"No!" He shouted to the cascading boos of the chubby angry faces. The crowd started to throw glass bottles that shattered against the canvas. The canvas of the perfect square, that great equalizer where color, nationality, and class blurred. He saluted as if he didn't mind their disapproval. He had been through too much.

"This is for the people of Liberia!" He shouted. "This is for my country!"

"You step off!"

"You should have lost! I lost money on you, you fucking idiot!"

"Damn fool! I had fifty bucks on the other guy!"

"The guy is from Africa! What do you expect? Go back to your own country, buddy!"

"Liberia! Who's even heard of that place? Sounds like a brand of suntan lotion!"

"Go home!"

No, I don't think so, he thought. *No, I think I'll stay right here in the good old United States*. He smiled and his smile seemed to shock the fans even more. Only a few were strong enough to withstand that smile. But they would not withstand it. No, not this crowd, raised on fast food and other forms of instant gratification. They instantly fell apart like children being told to come in because playtime was over. They wondered how a man could just beat another man half to death and then just smile politely at the end of it all. They shut up all of a sudden. And he smiled even more. He smiled until they started to file away like penguins, their hefty backs turning and heading to the nearest aisle. They had been defeated too. This wasn't a hometown crowd.

Minutes later, he was sitting in the locker room, his hand wraps being cut away by the good doctor. Her long gray hair draped over her back until it reached her midsection, her wrinkles around her eyes were carved in so darn deep that they were unforgettable, like canyons in Colorado or craters on some unknown world. She was an ugly woman but her manliness had a sort of strength to it that demanded respect. He respected her.

"Yes, I feel fine," he said.

"I don't know if you really do," the woman whispered, concerned.

"I do, trust me, I feel just fine. I really do."

"All right," the doctor said and threw up her hands, walking away. She had seen enough fighters to know when the symptoms set in. "You're in God's hands now. Don't say that I didn't warn you. I warned you. I always warn you people when the dementia comes."

The doctor disappeared, leaving him alone with his manager.

"Alfred," his manager said. His voice sounded like sewer water running underneath the shantytowns of Mumbai, filthy. "You had a great fight. Nothing wrong with a strong heart, but remember that a strong heart will not win you as much money as I can get you. I'm the one who's lookin' out for you, pal. Remember last year, when that fella tried to rub you out? I was the one who paid for your lawyer – the one that got you off! Remember that."

His manager paused and looked into Alfred's eyes. He wanted to make sure that Alfred remembered who had footed the bill. Fighters forgot about little things. Hell, with their brains half-bashed in, they forgot about most things.

"Remember that!" his manager stressed. "And remember that there is only one man on the face of this earth who can possibly get you enough money to leave that life that you lived up until here right there in the back of that memory of yours. You want to forget, don't you? I know that. But there is no way to forget unless you somehow remember good old Jack. Remembering me will help you forget Liberia, that awful dump you left behind, that place full of war and death and all of that jazz."

The manager pointed at himself with a thumb and a gold-toothed smile. His hair had been slicked back and his black goatee and pale skin made him look like a charcoal drawing of a devil. Alfred wasn't afraid of any devil. Dead. That's where Alfred should have been right then. It should have just ended long ago, before any of this. It should have ended back in Liberia when he was a boy. At least then, he wouldn't have to put up with this kind of jibber jabber. Sometimes, he wished he could die in that ring.

"Whatever," he replied. "Some murderer came to take me out and you got me a lawyer in Stamford, Connecticut. Big deal. Without me, you wouldn't have any money. You remember that. I'm your shot at the limelight too."

"Oh? Is that right, Mr. Hotshot? You would have been released by yourself? You would have handled that whole thing by yourself? The state prosecuting you and you would have just gotten off on your own, is that it?"

"Yeah, Jack. That's right. That's it. You guessed it. Someone tried to kill me and I was all hopped up on that steroid junk you gave me – that's what saved my life. If it wasn't for that cop, Waikiki Joe, talking me down, I would have killed half the city with that hormone you had me pumping into my veins. That's all I have to say to you, Jack." He extended his own wide finger and pointed at Jack. "That's all I have to say and now I have to go. So, excuse me, Jack. Get out of my way!"

"Alfie," his manager said, grabbing his wrist. His manager wasn't a big man, but he was strong and he knew how to adjust his tones to catch a man off guard. "Don't worry about it. Liberia is in your past. Your mother – Ellen Hawthorne. Forget about her. Forget about your country. You're in America now. It's different over here. Better. It's no hellhole here, buddy. You're in America now."

"I don't worry, Jack. Hell, I never seem to worry. So, don't you worry about me worrying! I'll see you around, *buddy*. I'm sure we'll run into each other again."

He walked away with his head held high. He walked away, out the door. He wasn't thinking about the fight. He was thinking about a feeling he had, deep down in his stomach, that something bad was about to happen. That hit on him in Connecticut was the start of something, something that hadn't been resolved. His mother's enemies had grown stronger

underground, grown more daring and even more violent. Soon, they would make themselves known and the good times he had enjoyed in his new country would come to an end.

Mere hours later, he was back home...

He walked away from the airport and into the sunlight. His new life, Miami, Florida. His mistress, a nameless shape, she smiled like the thoughtless pretty face she was paid to be. Every fighter has a mistress and his was the best-looking out of the whole bunch, her body tight, her breasts firm. She was there waiting for him with her plastic smile and fake blond hair. They drove off fast, dodging through traffic. She placed a hand on his leg as they cruised through that mess of cars like a needle sowing fabric, like a bullet shot through a cake.

The buildings here were nice to gaze at. They were like giant art deco mountains. It was an amazing thing to just gander at. Miami had some really, really nice buildings, with an infinite number of windows, each window containing a separate office or apartment. Each window meant one more person at least and probably many, many more with many, many other connections to many, many other people. That was Miami – a city based on making connections. Windows and people and more people.

He was dropped off in front of his home and his mistress disappeared as quickly as she had arrived, receding back into the void. He would not see her again for a few months. The structure that was his home was black with massive yellow windows. The light covered him until he could see nothing but the white. This must be the world of the cat burglar, the world of the thief, standing outside windows looking in. In there, his girl and child awaited him sitting about a long table.

She erupted into an empty joy after he entered the home seemingly safe from harm. He gave them both a thumbs up, and proceeded up the stairs to his bedroom. They would be happy with this result. It meant that the bills were going to get paid around there for a while longer.

His woman (not his mistress) did his laundry and paid for his wireless internet account (even though she could not use a computer for the life of her). Nintendo. Cupcakes. Cookies. Whatever he wanted they would get for him. His girl, his kid. They were his life. They loved him for the money he was making as much as anything else, but that was alright. That was human nature.

They brought him lemon drop cookies on this particular post-fight night. And he fell asleep fast. He collapsed into it. He was not like other men who would fuss and fret at night on sheets. No, he was not like that at all. He died every night. Especially after a fight. His body would be overcome by exhaustion and he would fall down and dream instantaneously.

He would dream about the possibilities. America. The greatest country God ever made, as far as profit was concerned. This was the home of innovation, the soil giving rise to some of the greatest minds, and some of the greatest fortunes. This is where all the new ideas came from these days, the world's big, busy brain, the heart of a world capitalist system turning the whole world into little Los Angeleses. Everyone in this thing had a special vibe, like he was willing to die working to achieve what he wanted. There was no questioning here. Everyone was one. All of the Americans seemed to move in step chasing after piles of dollars. They were like preprogrammed creatures. It was amazing to watch them. The way they just glided over the pavement. He admired them. He saw hundreds of Americans in his dreams that night, lined up to go to work in suits.

No, the Americans were not like the Liberians. Every Liberian had his own vision for things and could tolerate no other visions. In his dreams, a sea of Liberians marched towards the Americans in their suits... and the Americans just trampled over them, as if they weren't even there, leaving behind a trail of crushed meat.

He woke up sweating, afraid that he'd somehow been sent back. No, he was still here, still in the land where he would make his millions. He could rest easy here. He released a long torrent of steaming breath and collapsed into his pillow.

The next day, life continued on its predictable path....

Bernie was jumping rope when Alfred saw him again. His only son. The boy admired his father, as all little boys do, but he had no idea about what his father had been through. He could not know. He was too little and he had been raised in a sane world.

“What are you doing son? You’re trying to be a fighter like your old man? You shouldn’t do that. You know, your dad has been through a lot of tough fights. You should try to go to school, try to do something real with your life. Your father boxes but he goes to school too. Don’t forget that.”

“I’m working out, daddy. So I can be tough like you. I want to be the toughest man in the world, so I can take out people who come and try to kill me just like you did. I told all my friends at school that you took out a guy who came to take you out – but I’m going to be the toughest man alive, even tougher than you! You can bet on that!”

“Toughest man alive? Tougher than your dad? Like Muhammad Ali? Is that who you’re going to become? You’re a little boy. Listen to you, so young, talking like a grown-up with such a little bit of experience.”

“More like Sugar Ray Leonard. Or Sonny Liston. Mom said they were the best.”

“You want to be as brutal as Sonny Liston?”

“Brew-tall? Yeah. I want to be the most brew-tall fighter to ever walk.”

“Then you better start ripping apart live chickens. That’ll toughen you up.”

His son laughed without comprehending and they went for a walk together on the shore. The city lights stuck him in the eyeballs from across the bay. Pinks, blues, reds and greens glowing upon a waterfront built out of looping waves crashing with a static hum. It was too good to be true.

He remembered the days working the docks as a youth, unloading boats. It had been just like Miami, but poorer and harsher, the sun a little bit sadder. People think of Africa as a happy place, full of carnivals and joy. They couldn’t be more mistaken. Monrovia was smog and crowded rooms with seven or eight children sleeping on concrete floors. It was gunfire and loss, and the destruction of all morals in the all-consuming light of that eternal sun. That African sun destroyed things. It destroyed people. It turned them into things their own hearts did not want them to be.

“But not me,” he said to himself, his hand resting on Bernie’s shoulders. “It never got me. Africa never destroyed me. I came out of Africa whole.”

“What’s that, dad?”

“Oh, nothing at all, son. Just talking to myself. You know your dad. He always has a lot on his mind. His gears are always turning.”

“Thinking? About what, pops? What are you thinking about, daddy?”

“About the sun and the past. About the part of the tree under the soil and the branches that come from the trunk. About me and you. Good thoughts, son. Good thoughts. A tree can only have healthy branches if its roots are not putrid.”

They strolled on and Alfred kept thinking about that day in the motel over and over again. He had been hopped up on testosterone he had injected. He had killed that Columbian man. They had come to get him because of his mother but they had failed. He felt a sort of pang in his side, a warning. More trouble was sure to come his way. He had been feeling that pang a lot lately. It was like an old man’s joints, aching with the change in weather.

A cloud of violence was heading for him. His thoughts stayed on the same theme for the rest of the day. They would try to get him – or worse, his mother. The preacher on the television was speaking about redemption just then. Alfred had his hands slung across his son’s shoulders and his wife was in the kitchen, making them a pot of coffee. She walked from the kitchen with the pot and poured him a cup and sat down next to them, hot pot in hand. She poured herself a cup and set the pot down on the wooden table.

No matter what anyone does to you, you must not seek vengeance. There are violent men in the world. There are men whose violence is virtually exploding from their veins. It is visible in everything that they do. Anyone can see it – all you have to do is look hard enough. Conflict. Some men seek it. But I say to you now, brothers and sisters, seek not conflict but seek to be saved. Forgive all your enemies. Forgive those that wrong you.

“No,” Alfred muttered. “No, I don’t think I can forgive them.”

There was no forgiving those you must kill. The dog walked into the room and sat on Alfred's lap. She was a gorgeous border collie with a fluffy tail and wagging tongue. Father and son stroked her fur and she emitted a sort of doggie version of a purr. They had found the canine trapped in a fence in Little Havana outside a seafood place a couple of months before.

Because she was an orphan, they took her home, made her part of the family. She would bark to make sure everyone was up at six a.m. and she would follow Bernie everywhere to make sure he was safe. She was a sort of guardian in their home. Her semi-silent panting let everyone know that things were carrying on as they should.

Their home was by no means luxurious, but it was enough to make sure that people knew that they were respectable people. They *owned*. They did not rent. They were a family, a real family, not like the vestiges of human lives one typically sees – and they had a dog like a real family. Wife, son, and dog. He was a young father with a young woman and a younger kid, but he took care of those he loved.

We must cherish those we love, my brothers. We must value that which we have, but we must not destroy for the sake of preserving what we have, brothers. We must not wreck that which must be loved. Every human life must be preserved, every dream valued, including the dreams and goals of our enemies. He who hurts your family must be forgiven.

"If anyone hurts you guys or my mother, I'll kill the man!" Alfred said, raising his voice, his eyes staring intently at the screen. "If anyone tries to hurt you guys, I'll rip them apart! I'll kill them!"

Bernie opened his eyes briefly at the shouting but he could not keep them open. He was falling asleep sitting at the table so Alfred kissed him on his mop top and pulled a thick blanket lying on the floor over him. It could get chilly sometimes, even in a tropical paradise like Miami. Alfred picked up the dog and placed her within a doggie-gated part of the kitchen. The dog stared at him with her droopy eyes and whimpered.

"You know its sleepy time for you, puppy. Stay in there."

After they finished eating, the family took a nap. This was their typical, post-fight-day routine. They would sit around, talk, stuff themselves with food, laugh, drink coffee to try to stave off the sleepiness that comes with a heavy meal, but they would always give in. He would tuck his son into his bed and then fall asleep with his wife's hair on his chest, heaving up and down like a housecat.

When he woke up, his wife and child were sitting at the table eating cereal. He was wearing his underwear but he didn't bother getting dressed. He just plopped himself down on the table and began to eat again. Spoonful after spoonful. How long had he slept? He would always wake up from his naps asking the same question.

His wife and child laughed. At one point, his mouth was too full of cereal and he had to spit some out. Everybody erupted into laughter. He stood up from the table to check on the dog, to make sure she had enough to eat.

"Puppy?" He called out.

No reply.

"Sweetie, did you put the dog outside?" he asked his wife.

"No, she should be gated off in the kitchen like always."

He called the dog again and again.

His wife joined him and they both called her name but she did not come. They searched high and low and they found nothing unusual. The dog was simply gone. She had disappeared. His wife and child continued searching.

The phone rang. He ran to answer it, hoping that a neighbor had found the puppy. He answered eagerly but was disappointed upon hearing the caller's voice. It was his mother.

"Alfred, I'm going to be coming to America."

"Listen, mother, this is a bad time. We can't find the dog. Will I see you mother? Will you come visit me when you come to America?"

"Yes, if you come to New York to meet me. I would like to see you Joseph. We could spend some time together. We could walk through the city, see some stores."

"What's in New York, mother?"

"I'm addressing the UN, son. They're putting me up in an NYU apartment. I'm speaking at the university as well. President Ellen Hawthorne is coming to America!"

Their conversation was interrupted by the sound of a shrill scream. He ran out to the garden with the cordless phone in hand. His wife's eyes spoke volumes. He understood immediately. The dog, their precious puppy, was hanging from a rope tied to a tree, her body cut open, her innards hanging down to the grass. She was swinging back and forth in the wind like a wind chime.

"Mother... I think I know a better place for you to stay..."

He hung up the phone, his eyes watering, and held his wife as she cried, sobbing uncontrollably. The storm had arrived, blowing through town with a violent preliminary gust, and this was their message to him. Beware, your days of laughter are coming to an end. Enjoy the time you have left because everything is going to change.

Hell has come for you.

4. The Convocation of Our Brave Heroes

Waikiki Joe was smoking grass lazily and drinking, as was his habit as a proud drunkard, when the kid called him out of the blue. He didn't answer the phone at first. He let it go to the machine and kept his feet up on a small fold-out table in front of the TV. The game was on. The Pats had the ball and were preparing for an all-out assault. He was shouting at the television, dressed in slacks, slippers, a t-shirt full of holes and a dirty white/yellowish bath robe. Officer Ricardo Rey was sitting on the other chair, holding a bottle of beer, his eyes bloodshot. Rey was another one of Stamford's finest, famous for drinking inside his police vehicle, getting in trouble the year before for stopping a driver under the influence of alcohol while under the influence of alcohol himself.

The phone rang again. Joe cursed and the ring kept coming. It was like a bee stinging him, pulling the stinger out of his flesh and then coming down on him for another sting. He couldn't keep the outside world from intruding.

"What?!!!" Joe screamed, picking up the receiver. "What the heck do you want? The Pats are playing right now. Do you hear me? The Pats are playing!"

"This is Alfred," a soft voice hummed. "Remember me? Alfred Hawthorne."

"The kid?" Joe asked. "The steroid kid? Alfred! Alfred, the steroid boy!"

"Yes," Alfred replied. "I need you, Joe. My mother is coming into New York City soon. She's going to be making some big speech asking some very important people to send a peacekeeping army into Liberia to help keep the rebels in check, to preserve democracy out there. I think the rebels are paying someone to have her killed when she touches down. Or heck, they might be coming after me again. This time, they might get me. I'm sort of in a hard place right now, Joe."

"You got any proof?" Joe inquired, rubbing his chin. The cop in him came out even when he was drunk and high. "This isn't the kind of thing you say just because you're going through some paranoia, is it? Otherwise, you'll be looking over your shoulder your whole life. A lot of children of important people go through what you're going through. Do you know for sure they're coming to get you or your mother?"

"No. Well, yes. I mean, I think they killed my dog, Joe, cut her up and hung her for me to find. I think they're trying to tell me something, to send me a message here. My mother just happens to be coming into the country and they cut up my dog."

"Well, then we don't know," Joe said, scratching his chest. The conversation smelled like extra work and he would have to try to avoid that like the plague. "That's not any kind of clear message I ever heard of. A dog? It could just be some sick puppy who likes slicing up people's pets, kid. We don't know what's happening. You're probably panicking."

"I'd like her to stay with you in Stamford, Joe. It's close enough to the City. You're the only guy I can trust. You really helped me out with that case I had up there. You talked me down! I'm asking you to take care of my mother. I know we barely know each other but you really, really helped me out with my case, helped me get the whole thing dismissed, convinced the prosecutor to drop it. You went out on a limb for me."

Joe stood up and brushed potato chip crumbs off his belly. He threw Rey a glare and walked into the kitchen. He patted his hair down and scratched his chest again. He would have to muster up a greater effort to avoid the work being sent his way.

"You got the wrong guy, kiddo. I'm just a regular old, fat cop. I don't know nothing about international intrigue. I just go into the bathroom to read my newspaper, get to work fifteen minutes late, take a magazine into the bathroom there, try to pretend I'm a cop, and come home to read some more on my own toilet again. That's my life. You need a super-cop for this kind of operation, like one of those Asian Kung-Fu Masters on the tube. I'm not your customer. Sorry, kiddo. Good luck finding someone to help."

"I don't need an Asian Kung-Fu Master, Joe. I need you! Please help me, Joe! You're the only guy I can trust. Everybody else can't be trusted. I know you're good. You helped me out already. If a guy helps you out once like that, you know he's a good guy. I know you can help me out here. *Please*."

"Jeeze. You help out a guy one time and you're gonna have to help him out forever, whenever he gets himself into a pickle? Hold on a second. Let me ask my friend. I need a second opinion. I need to know whether it would be crazy to try to help you out with this thing."

Joe placed his hand over the receiver, walked into the living room and looked at Rey. The other man looked up at him with drool dripping off the sides of his mouth. He blinked his red eyes and smiled, scratching his outstretched legs. He was far-gone off the whiskey.

"I need your advice, Rey," Joe said. "You're a clever guy."

"Uh-huh," Rey replied. "My mom always said so."

"Seriously, Rey. I need your advice on this one."

"Sure. And I'm ready to give it to you. Drunk or not."

"The kid, Alfred, just called me," Joe whispered, as if the house was bugged. "The kid from the murder, remember? The boxer who took out the Columbian who came to give him a necktie? He wants his mom to stay here with me. Says she needs protection. I think some folks might even be after her. A big deal. He wants her to stay here, Rey. Wants her to stay here while she's doing some conference in New York City. What do I do, Rey? What do I tell the kid?"

"Uh-huh. Well, you have to tell him something."

"I mean, this could be dangerous and I'm just a local cop. I could die. This is big stuff here, Rey. This is international intrigue."

"Uh-huh. Yes. You're gonna have to make a decision, Joe."

"This could be the biggest decision of my life."

"Okay. That's right. Yes."

"Maybe I should call my mother. She'll know the best thing to do... *no*, no Rey. I'm going to make the decision on my own. I'm going to do it. I'm going to help the kid. It feels right. It just feels like what I should do."

"Okay. You do that."

Joe turned back to the phone and cleared his throat. He patted his hair down and breathed in. It was time to be noble. It was time to be heroic. It was time to be a matinee idol. He always felt he had a little Charles Bronson in him.

"I'll do it, kid," he said. "You bet I'll do it. You can count on old Joe."

“Thanks, Joe. I knew you’d help.”

“Yes,” Joe replied, his voice booming. He was full of energy now. “Good old Waikiki Joe is always here! Just let me know when she’s coming over. She’ll be as safe as Fort Knox. I promise you!”

“O.k., Joe. Will do. Thanks again. I knew I could count on you.”

“You can *always* count on Waikiki Joe! Alwaaaaayyyssssss!”

Back in Miami...

A particularly disturbed group of people were sitting near other, listening to Waikiki Joe. Their purposes were devilish and their hearts devoid of sentiment. A.J. winked at Jenny while Kjawan stretched his arms. They were sitting in a van naked. At first, they had been sitting in that van wearing clothes. Then, as the Miami heat had caused the temperature inside the van to climb, they had found themselves sitting in a van wearing some few items of clothing. Finally, as the van had become a sauna, they had decided to sit in there nude as they day they had been hatched.

The van was filled with listening equipment – computers, headphones, and unidentifiable technology. Officer Joe Waikiki’s voice was resonating in the vehicle. They were listening to everything. They had killed the dog to irk the lady’s son and he had been irked indeed. He made exactly the sort of call they had expected him to make.

“He’s going to send his mom up to this guy’s house,” Jenny said. “Jeeze. Did we really have to kill the dog? What did we do that for? I mean, I know we were trying to push the kid’s buttons, get him to do something stupid but I’m confused. How is killing the dog going to help us?”

“It isn’t,” A.J. answered. “I did it for fun. I was right about coming down here before going to Liberia, though, to listen in, gather info. She’s coming over here and the Alfred boy is sending her to this poor guy’s house. That’s perfect – it saves us a trip to a country where we’d stick out, probably be found out, and probably wouldn’t have access to weapons. Guy’s name is Joe and he’s a cop. The call went out to Stamford, Connecticut. His last name is probably Waikiki. A suburban house, a fat cop – it’s perfect!”

“Sounds Hawaiian,” Kjawan observed. “Probably not many Hawaiians out in Stamford. Probably be easy to find the guy. I don’t think we’ll have much trouble. The whole thing is working out well so far. We pushed the kid into making a stupid mistake, putting his mom into some old cop’s hands.”

“We’ll wax the stupid cop, wax the kid, and then wax the mom if she’s there too,” Jenny announced, a smile crossing her face. It was all lining up just right. “I wish we hadn’t killed the dog. I like puppies. I hate killing animals. It turned out to be the right thing, made the kid send this lady to some suburban home for safekeeping.”

They dressed and went to the front of the van. Starting the car, they drove to a burger joint on the edge of town. They each had a burger and soda, fries, and a milkshake. Kjawan ate some chocolate mousse for desert and went outside to smoke a cigarette, leaving Jenny alone with A.J. The afternoon sun was filtering into the restaurant and she yawned.

“You like him?” A.J. asked Jenny as they observed the black man outside the window from inside the burger joint. “You think you can trust him? You think he loves you? He doesn’t, you know. He’s incapable of loving anyone. You really believe a man like that can love you, Jenny? You’re a damn fool if you believe that.”

“Yeah,” she replied firmly. She wasn’t about to have a philosophical discussion about love. “I think he loves me enough. Kjawan is a good man. A damn good man in his own way. We all do the best we can. Let’s focus on killing this Ellen Hawthorne lady.”

"No," A.J. chortled. "No. He's not a good man. Neither am I. We're not good people, honey. Not one of us. Not in any way. You realize that don't you?"

"Well," she purred, "he's as good as he can be when you kill people for a living. He's that good. That's about the limit of goodness for all three of us."

"That ain't that good, sister. Not that good at all. Damn rotten, actually, if you ask me. He's rotten to the core. He's a blight upon this earth, just like you and me."

"No," she concluded after a few moments of silence. "No, he's not. I'm not rotten and neither is he. We're both trying to live life by our own rules. Sometimes, other people get hurt, but we're trying to make something out of ourselves. The truth is that, if this thing goes well, and we move to Angola and move into a whole new level of play in the assassination industry, we might have a good life there, him and I."

Kjawan went back inside the joint and they paid the bill using cash, splitting it three ways. Climbing back inside the van, they drove to a movie theater. They watched a movie about a pirate who became a ballet dancer. It was supposed to be a comedy. The pirate talked with a funny rhythm, like someone with an unusual speech impediment. He also danced around in a sort of a dress while holding a golden sword. No famous actors had dared star in this one. Only in dingy theaters in Miami do these kinds of films still get shown.

Before the movie was over, they had gotten up and left the theater. They drove to an arcade and played videogames until three in the morning and went back to the hotel where the three of them fell asleep in the same king-size bed. They had killing to do in the next few days and their rest was crucial. To the unbiased observer, standing over them, pondering them, wondering what they were, they looked a great deal like snakes interwoven in a burrow, awaiting the thawing of the ice to slither out into the forest and capture their prey.

Jenny awoke in the middle of the night and proceeded to the bathroom. It had been a long day filled with good news – they weren't going to Monrovia after all because Ellen Hawthorne was coming here! - and she felt a bit woozy from it all. It was three in the morning and the bathroom was swirling around her. Before she could stop herself, the bile spewed out of her and into the sink. Perhaps she was coming down with a cold. She had felt this way for a while, now...since...

No! She put her hands on her cheeks and stared into her own eyes in disbelief. How had that little military brat, so idealistic, fallen so far from the tree? Could she really be like this, so cavernous inside? Which man was the father? Would the baby be strong and intelligent, like Kjawan? Or somber and responsible like A.J.? Would the baby be born with wolf's teeth? Would he have black or white skin?

"Please don't let me be pregnant," she murmured. She closed her eyelids tightly, trying to focus on the mission, trying to focus on this woman, Ellen Hawthorne, who would be coming to America soon. "Please don't let me be pregnant. I can't be pregnant. My God, this can't be happening. Not me. I kill things. I don't give birth to them. Damn! Damn! I'm pregnant. I know it!"

Jenny walked out of the bathroom and gazed at the two murderers lying in the bed. She went into her purse and pulled out a pregnancy test. She had purchased one the day before, suspecting but dismissing the notion at the same time. It had seemed too ridiculous, the notion that she could be with child. Rushing back into the bathroom and closing the door, turning the lock, she administered the test and waited.

"Please, don't let it be blue. Please! Please! It can't be. It can't be. Please, Lord God, don't let it be blue. I can't have a child. I'm me. I'm a murderer! I can't. Please. Please. Please. Don't let it be blue!"

As soon as the result came, she ran out of the bathroom, grabbed the room keys off the night stand and went out into the hallway in her pajamas. She walked down the hall to the elevator and took it to the first floor. The line. The line had been blue.

After reaching the first floor, she walked out to the glass door, pushed it open, and left the building. She gazed up at the stars. She continued staring without saying anything at all until a bald man, drunk, walked up to her and smiled. He was heavy-set with blue eyes. He had a wedding band on his ring finger.

“Hey sweetie,” he muttered, wrapping his arm around her, his breath smelling of alcohol. “Hello there, sweetums. What’s such a pretty thing like you doing out here all alone on a Miami night? You working? You a working girl?”

“What do you want?” she said, pushing him off her. He stumbled back. “What could someone like me possibly want with someone like you? You’re disgusting. Just looking at you makes me sick!”

“I just wanna say hello, baybay. That’s all. Just say hello. You a working girl?”

“Hello.”

She rushed forward and pushed the man and he fell onto the street, hitting his head on the concrete. He got up to his knees and massaged his temples. His head was bleeding. He was confused. She laughed at him and turned around and went back inside, back to the elevator, and back upstairs, wondering the whole time whether she really was going to have a baby. It didn’t seem possible.

Meanwhile, in Liberia, a good mother was thinking of her child...

Children. So many dead children walking through those fields. Some of them corpses. Others living corpses. She thought of her child. Alfred. Mothers and sons. The bond between them was inseparable. Once that bond was created, it could not ever be broken.

Ellen Hawthorne gazed out of the window of her Presidential Executive Mansion. From the outside, it was a simple gray building – the sort of structure that might be a municipal court of larger county in an Eastern American state. It was surrounded by a metallic fence and armed guards waited with machine guns by the gate. If one was so lucky as to get to go inside, one would discover it to be a lush home with several tasteful paintings by African artists and red carpets streaming down the halls.

The Executive Mansion had been built during the reign of President William Tubman, the 19th President of Liberia, a man viewed as responsible for a short period of prosperity, perhaps the only such period in all of the history of this saddest Southern land. A man had tried to kill him, Tubman, but had failed. In most cases, the gunmen in Liberia were highly proficient, successful in their assassination attempts, leaving behind pieces of meat that had once been animated but now lay strewn about.

Now, gunmen were trying to kill her. They had already tried to kill her son. Alfred. Her boy. Mothers and sons. The bond was unbreakable, irresistible, and indefatigable. Mothers and sons. Her poor Alfred. She had dragged him into all of this.

If one were to stroll down Broad Street in Monrovia, one would come across the old Ducor Hotel, the first five-star hotel in all of Africa. It had once been a truly glorious structure, but it had ultimately been closed in 1989 when the murderous Charles Taylor had decided to begin his bloody coup. The buildings were emptied and looted. Now, Monrovia had no five-star hotels and a minority of literate residents obtained their news from the Daily Talk, a bulletin board put up near the airport, because there was no newspaper. Charles Taylor had been responsible for rapes, beheadings, immolation, and dismemberments, as well as two major civil wars lasting over a decade and the complete paralysis of civil society.

Her cat rubbed up against her leg and she reached down to pet him. It was an unthinkable thing in Monrovia, to have a pet, to waste food on a feline or any other animal. Most of population lived in a sort of constant starvation. Their lives were simpler than hers and the knowledge of that fact weighed down upon her constantly. These were *her* people. She was responsible for all the lives contained within her borders. She wanted them to prosper, wanted them to achieve great things.

“Hello, baby,” she whispered as the cat purred gently. “Hello, my sweet cat.”

“Are you still going to New York?” a voice inquired from the shadows.

She turned to face her personal assistant and smiled at the skinny man with the bow tie and white smile. He wore black-rimmed glasses and kept his suit immaculate. He had been a poor boy from a shanty town but now found himself feeling the pride that comes with decent work. Work breeds decency in men and virtue in women, she thought, looking over him. She wished her whole country could experience that.

“Yes,” she answered. She smiled at her friend. “Yes, I am. Get the bags ready, my boy. Get everything ready. I’m headed to the Big Apple, New York. We need help, my good man. We need it desperately. We simply can’t handle this situation alone out here. Not with this General Abel Thompson billing himself as the return of Charles Taylor. This country can’t stand another Charles Taylor.”

“This will be a great speech,” the young man said. He loved Ellen Hawthorne, as did most of the laborers and their children. She was only despised among militarists and bandits. “Abel Thompson may have his dreams of power, but you must realize that he will fail. God is with us. God will guide us to success.”

“God? God in Liberia? I certainly hope so, my young, good kind boy. Yes, I truly hope so. It is time for some good luck to show its head here. People outside of Liberia believe that our civil war has ended but the remnants of Taylor’s crew of madmen are still the scourge of our country, gathering under the banner of this Thompson murderer. It is time that he and they be exposed for the heartless scum that they all are and I will be proud to help make such a revelation to the world in any way I humbly can. He has killed many of our sons. He tried to have my own son killed.”

“You will show the world what the Liberian people are all about, President Hawthorne! You are the first president I have ever been proud of in my lifetime. I have never had this experience before, this feeling of confidence in a person.”

She smiled and patted the young man on the shoulder. He was a believer. Many such people, especially the youth, believed in her. Some didn’t know anything except that there had been an election and they had actually chosen their representative – a woman – to lead them. She was their voice.

“Yes, I will show them what an African woman can do, my good young man.”

They laughed together as they strolled down the hallway to her chambers to place her clothes in her modest, scuffed suitcases and fly halfway around the world. There were snakes that needed to be crushed but the sea of serpents had grown too wild in Liberia. In New York, the process of setting fire to the whole slew of them could begin, although the world was so full of such snakes that it seemed the more of them you killed, the more of them reared their ugly heads.

Elsewhere in Monrovia...

The most frightening serpent of them all was right there, in Monrovia. The King Serpent. Dan Wentworth, King of the Snakes. Yes, Dan Wentworth watched from his table at the small café as Ellen Hawthorne’s limousine sped down the busy street with the peddlers and rickshaws. Wentworth was dirty blond and a pure racist, a British man raised in North

Dakota by a businessman father working there for a corporation. Wentworth had decided to make his life within the military and intelligence services to satisfy a natural cruelty that existed within him, unquenchable, a monster that found little to gorge on in civilian life.

He hated Africa and Africans with all his black heart. He truly hated their dark skin, their sweaty bodies, their emaciated forms. He wanted to burn them, to watch them be consumed by some massive fire. He wanted to reduce them to dust.

“Jesus, I hate this damn continent,” he muttered, putting a pink handkerchief up to his mouth. Dan Wentworth was also a homosexual, a man who maintained a young woman for the sake of appearances and several boys in small apartments – all of them white boys, of course – throughout the world for his personal amusement. “No beautiful men here. Just ugly black bastards. Where are all the attractive men? Why couldn’t pretty white fellows live in this hellhole on Earth?”

The man sitting across from him rolled his eyes and snorted. The Russian (no one really knew his name anymore – it had been lost along with his decency) glanced at his sandwich and wished he could turn it into a real meal. Even the sandwiches in Monrovia were skinny. He placed a hand on his corpulent stomach and growled disapprovingly. Then, he lit himself a cigarette, the frustration of it all falling upon him.

“You are not here to make yourself boyfriends, my happy friend,” the Russian poured out, his voice slow and thick. He was unfailingly patient. “You are here for the purpose of meeting the only man that should matter to you. One man. Our business partner. General Thompson. The next Charles Taylor they call him.”

“All the same,” Wentworth purred, “I wouldn’t mind mixing business with pleasure. It’s always fun to mix business and pleasure – but it’s so hard to do so here with all these awful black faces. I’m not sure how people can find black men attractive, I really don’t.”

“We should have taken her out right here,” the Russian said, pointing to the limousine as it disappeared around a corner. “She’s going to New York to give a speech. She’s headed to the airport. We could have had her done right here, Wentworth. Right now. If the crew we hired had been right here, it would have been done. It’s a shame we didn’t move sooner. Now, the job is going to have to be done over there. There’s no time to fly the crew out here and have them take her out. We didn’t move fast enough.”

The crew. The Russian had flown to America to meet with them, to look over their leader, to evaluate him. He had found the man unimpressive, a sort of unprofessional psychopath in the business for all the wrong reasons. The man had made him wander into the middle of a pond in his boxer shorts, for Pete’s sake.

“Patience,” Wentworth hissed, “that is what you need. Patience. Our beautiful adaptable little boys back in America say they’ll take care of this and they already know all about this thing. They know she’s on her way to America, that the job will have to take place over there now. Trust me, I know the kid we put on this job. He will not blow it. He’ll take her out before she gets to the podium. Now, he’s a cutie, that boy. Not like these impoverished men out here.”

“Yes,” the Russian scoffed, “but is he capable of pulling off the job over there? That is the question. This thing is moving much faster than we had thought – she decided to schedule the speech and finalize the deal with the UN troops without informing anyone! The General will want assurances. General Thompson will not tolerate mistakes. If we fail him, the good General will come after us. We will live out the remainder of our days looking over our shoulders until someone comes and takes our heads off.”

“Trust me, sweetie. I know this boy like the back of my own hand. The job might even be easier to do over there than doing it over here. After all, you stick a serious white hitter here in the middle of Liberia, he’d stick out like a sore thumb, and we sure as hell can’t

hire local talent. Who knows how many informants Ellen Hawthorne has out there just listening? She seems to have an uncanny ability to devise our plots before we get them moving. She's like a fox, that lady. She knew we were after her again – that's why she scheduled the UN thing all of a sudden, without any formal announcements."

"He's here!"

Thompson arrived. A massive man in a black t-shirt and jeans with a machine gun hanging over his shoulder approached the table and sat down in an empty chair. The Russian shook hands with him and introduced him as General Abel Thompson. Wentworth extended a dainty hand at the General and they shook. The General threw a glance at the Russian as if to say *you didn't tell me that this feminine man was my business partner*. The Russian shrugged as if to say *these are modern times, General, and he's a Westerner*.

"A drink?" The Russian asked, a smile crossing his face.

"Sure," Thompson replied behind his aviator shades. "I could murder one actually."

The Russian threw up a hand and the waiter approached the table. The Russian ordered another round of beers and the waiter nodded and disappeared into the café. The place was filled with local businessmen wearing dusty suits. It was amazing that business could even be carried out in an atmosphere of impending civil war.

"When?" the General asked. "When are you going to actually deliver on your promises, gentlemen? I'm getting impatient. I tire of these delays!"

"Soon, sir," Wentworth hummed. "Very soon. She will not make it to the UN meeting I promise you. You will not have to worry about her finalizing her plans with her speech and her agreements. She will not close the deal with the UN people. I guarantee that."

"The whole reason I hired you was precisely to prevent such a speech, to keep her from making that deal in New York. I repeat my question," the General said, in perfect American English. "When? Do you realize that everything I have ever worked for will fail, that my reign as the great General Abel Thompson, King of Liberia, is in jeopardy because some loudmouthed woman can't keep her trap shut? Do you realize that?"

"Before she speaks," the Russian answered, as calm as warm tea. "Within the next two days. She'll be taken out. Trust me. She's done. She will not make the speech."

"If she can close the deal on getting foreign troops here, I'm the one who is done," the General observed. His eyes were very white and large. "If she is able to ask the UN for help, able to argue that I'm the next incarnation of Genghis Khan or Adolf Hitler and that they should intervene before a third Liberian civil war breaks out, I'm done. My men and I, our sacrifices, will have been for nothing. I can't let that happen. This revolution is going to happen, gentlemen. It has to!"

"It will," Wentworth stressed. "I promise you. She will not close the deal with the UN people. She will not make her speech. We will kill her before she ever gets up to the podium. I promise you, sir."

"It better not all fall apart. Otherwise, a hit will be taken out on the two of you. Your lives will be the cost of your failure. I will personally see to that."

Wentworth smiled nervously and threw a glance at the Russian. The waiter arrived with their drinks and the Russian gulped his beer down in one movement while Wentworth and the General watched silently. Wentworth sipped on his beer pensively.

"The lady dies," the Russian stated flatly, slamming the beer on the table. "The lady dies before she can open up her damn mouth and ruin your plans. She dies and she dies bloody. No room more mistakes. The crew takes her out in America before she gets to the podium. She dies in America."

"The lady dies *soon*," Wentworth added. "She dies before she can meet with anyone. That's a promise, General. You can take that promise to the bank, sir. She dies in my country. She dies over in the United States!"

"Good. Because if she lives to see the end of the week, the two of you won't live to see the beginning of next month."

They stared at each other in silence and Wentworth managed a flirtatious smile. The General got up and left the two men alone at the café. Wentworth realized that the General was a giant. A violent, mean sort of giant who could stomp his head in. They needed to reach out to the crew, make sure that everything was going according to plan. General Abel Thompson was not a man who would take failure lightly.

Less than two hours later...

"The woman dies before she can open her mouth!" Wentworth shouted into the phone. He was lying in bed in his underwear while watching a gay pornographic film about two police officers who wear tights and capes and solve mysteries. The film played in the background as he listened for a response. "Say it, boy! Tell me you understand what I just told you! This woman, this Ellen Hawthorne, dies before she can open her damn trap! She dies before she can open her fucking mouth! Say it! Say it!"

Silence.

"Fine," a grave voice finally answered in a drawl. "That makes the plan easier anyhow. Hell, we might even kill her son just for the fun of it. I just cut up his dog for laughs, for no reason at all. No other reason than I felt the desire to do it – and I like dogs. I don't know how I feel about people. I like dogs more than people."

"Good. Do you know where she's going to be staying?"

"Of course, boss. We've been listening to everything she and her son have been saying to each other. We've been parked outside her son's home in Miami, listening to the calls – it's a good thing too, because we found out she isn't going to be in Liberia before you even told us! We know everything that there is to know. We know more than we should. She's staying with some silly cop in Connecticut, a short drive away from the city. Alfred trusts the cop for some reason, some fellow named Waikiki Joe, helped out with his case up there. We just found out where this cop lives, his home address. We're heading over there soon to take care of this mess. Like I said boss, we set up surveillance outside Alfred Hawthorne's house and we now know all the details about how the whole thing is going down. I know everything. We're listening to all his calls!"

"Good. Make sure to kill Alfred too. Just a little extra something for the client."

"The kid? That wasn't part of the deal but I was going to throw that in anyhow. Consider it a little gift from me to you."

"There's an extra two hundred grand in it for you. Just get it done. Kill the kid in front of the mom. The client is a sicko and he'll get a kick out of that."

Wentworth could hear A.J. laughing on the other end. It was a sarcastic laugh, a haughty laugh, the laugh of a man surprised by those doubting him. It was also the laugh of a man who was completely insane.

"Then, he's as dead as Shakespeare, pal."

"Good. Make sure of it. Otherwise, it's your life. You heard me? I guaranteed that you guys were good. My life, your life – both of us are on the hook for this one. Don't mess this up! Don't mess it up!"

He hung up on the killer and turned his attention back to the film. Minutes later, there was a knock at the door. He got up without bothering to get dressed and let in two young

black men wearing t-shirts and shorts. He had decided to become more open-minded. It was a new world, after all. No sense in holding on to the ideas of a bygone age.

"I've got condoms," Wentworth said. "I'm not risking it with you boys. You never know what the hell you can catch here in Africa sleeping with you negroes."

Outside the hotel room, the music raged. Wentworth planted a kiss on one of his boys and tickled the other one, remarking on his shyness. He was going to have a perfectly wonderful time tonight!

Meanwhile, right outside Wentworth's hotel, amidst a sea of faces...

"Gba-to-wa."

"Ku-maneeju."

The two orchestra leaders complimented each other with exaggerated affability, hugging tightly before the crowd of hundreds of excited observers. They wore multicolored tribal robes and smiled at the musicians standing behind them. One of them waved to a drummer and the man waved back to him. There was a tradition being represented here, one hundreds of years old.

They switched to English. The more rotund man waved to the observers and welcomed all the tourists to the event. There were no tourists there. The foreigners were aid workers looking for a good time to relieve their depression. It was tough working in Liberia. It was probably the toughest beat in the world.

"We welcome each and every one of you to the first ever Monrovia Music Festival. As we all know, our country has had more than a few setbacks. We've had a string of bad luck, you could say. Very bad luck!"

The crowd laughed sympathetically and the man continued:

"But we should not let these setbacks get to us, tear us down. It is wonderful for us all to be here, to be able to celebrate our music for the first time I can think of in my lifetime. We are a proud nation. I feel this is my heart. We are a beautiful nation. We have beautiful music, beautiful women, and we are strong. We are very strong! We are STRONG!"

The man paused and tears seemed to come to his eyes as if memories rushed upon him. He fought them back and the musician standing next to him placed a hand on his shoulder and patted it. It had been a long time since they had been able to play in public. Decades of war had made every concert an opportunity to create a new bloodbath for some member of the opposition to the reigning regime. The speaker continued, his voice breaking up now:

"We are s-s-strong and... t-t-tonight... we show our strength! Let us celebrate, let us drink, and let us *dance the night away!*"

The crowd burst into mad shouts and the musicians dove into their instruments. Amidst the crowd, watching the people dance energetically, full of life for the first time in so long, was the Russian, coldhearted and unimpressed. He was not dancing, not excited. He eyed the women and walked alone through the crowd like a shadow. He was an old dinosaur with a trail of pain behind him. A product of the cold war when men like him could assassinate and consider their deeds patriotic. He knew no merriment, only profit now. He had learned about the beauty of profit from the Communists who seemed to believe it was worthless. If profit meant nothing, why did members of the politburo restrict access to the ski resorts to the elite of Russian society? Why not make those resorts accessible to peasants?

He lit himself a cigarette and waived to a young Liberian woman eyeing him shyly. She was wearing a short skirt, carrying a purse and he motioned her over to him. In the background, the music continued pulsating. It was as if waves of energy bounced on the people. They had been liberated and the lifting of the fog of repression had set them in motion. They were free to dance again.

Bam-Bam-pop-pop

The flute hummed melodiously over the rhythm of the drums. The young woman wafted through the music and sat on the stool next to him, smiling a yellow but polite smile. He offered her a cigarette and she accepted. Her hands were scarred. She had been a victim of the war, quite obviously.

They slept together that night. He stared up at the ceiling as she lay on his chest. He barely slept, watching the blades of the ceiling fan twirl round and round. He had paid for the young woman to be with him. This was not unusual for him. He couldn't remember the last time he had slept with a woman without paying her. Isolation from human things like marriage or girlfriends kept him efficient and it let him do things, evil things – like lie in bed with a liberated woman on his chest as he plotted her downfall back to the slavery she had once known and would soon know again all too well.

In Stamford, Connecticut, Waikiki Joe was reading a book on Liberia when he heard a knock at the door. He was still dressed in a pair of boxer shorts and a bathrobe. He had a pistol lying near his feet with their ripped white socks. He stooped down and picked the pistol up and tip-toed to the door.

He looked through the peephole and saw Nika and Drex, the good linguist and his psychologist immigrant African wife, standing outside. Joe had been listening to jazz and the music floated to the welcome mat where Nika and her husband stood expectantly.

“Good song,” Drex observed meekly, as Joe opened the door.

“Thanks,” Joe replied, scratching his nose with his pistol. “Come on in.”

He led them to the den and motioned to the couch. They sat down. Nika was wearing a pantsuit and Drex was wearing farmer overalls and a checkered shirt. He wondered how these two people, so different from one another, could keep a marriage going. How had they met? What did they talk about when they were alone? He had dated a foreign girl once, although he couldn't remember where she was from.

“Make yourself at home,” Joe said. “I have to make a quick run to the bathroom, so I'll be right back. You guys go ahead and talk to each other for a little bit. I promise I won't be long. I'll just be in and out.”

Nika and Drex sat quietly while hearing the sounds of a man straining in the bathroom and the subsequent sound of a toilet flushing. They heard a door slam and soon Joe was back in the room. He sat across from them. He hadn't washed his hands. He scratched his nose.

“You didn't wash your hands,” Nika observed with a look of disgust. “I didn't hear the water running. You went to the bathroom and you didn't even bother to wash your hands. That's absolutely sickening, Joe.”

“What are you doing here?” Joe asked, rubbing his chin. He wasn't about to be lectured on hygiene to by some yuppie academic. “What do you guys want from me? I mean, I always appreciate having such well-educated professionals like yourselves in my humble home but I'm really just wondering what you guys have stopped by for. Why are you here?”

Drex leaned forward and smiled at Joe, his hand on his wife's knee. They had rehearsed this before coming over. Like a typical professional couple. Joe laughed. Professional couples rehearsed everything before they did anything. There was no such thing as spontaneity with them. If they ever had to adlib anything, he wanted to be there to see it.

“We're here because of Ellen Hawthorne,” Drex said, beaming with pride. He was proud of being able to do some good in this world. “We were over at the supermarket and Officer Rey was standing next to us in line, waiting to pay for his groceries. Well, he asked us about work and we started talking and he mentioned that Alfred's mother is staying over here because someone might be trying to kill her and you had agreed to protect her. Officer Rey, your friend, told us all about it at that supermarket. I'm surprised you didn't call me to tell me about it, Joe! I mean, since that day when Hawthorne's son, Alfred, almost got killed and then almost killed several members of our police force here, we've been friends!”

“Yeah, that's right,” Joe answered. “You're my friend and you were there when that motel thing with Alfred happened and Alfred is Ellen Hawthorne's son. Some African warlord tried to have him taken out to intimidate his mother and now he's trying to kill his mother. So what? What does all this have to do with the two of you coming over here?”

“Well,” Drex muttered, throwing his wife a quick glance, sucking up strength from her reassurance, and then returning his gaze to the other man, “the truth is that we'd like to help. My wife and I would love to be able to help Alfred and President Hawthorne! You see, both of us work a great deal with African groups here in Connecticut as volunteers and we'd

just love to help solve this problem. If we can be of any assistance, just let us know, Joe. We'd love to help out. We really would."

"You're an academic, pal," Joe noted. He wasn't about to have some paper-pushing wimp following him around. "What do you know about shooting people and being a bodyguard? This is serious stuff, Drex. There's a lady and she trusts me with her life. Do you know what that is? To have someone trust you with their frigging life? No, you don't. Because you're not a real, down for anything cop. You're not the sort of man they call when people's lives are at stake. You're not the sort of man who can deal with protecting someone, even if nothing is likely to happen. Stuff is not going to hit the fan here. It's all going to go according to plan, without incident."

"The fan?" Drex asked. "When what hits the fan? What does the fan have to do with anything, Joe? The fan?"

"Yep. The fan, Drex. Nothing is going to hit the fan. Nothing is going to happen."

Nika sighed and rubbed her temples. She managed a polite smile and placed her hand on her husband's shoulder. That was the signal for Drex to shut up. It was her time to speak. She leaned forward and maintained that plastic smile in place. As a psychologist, she was used to dealing with difficult people.

"Let's be honest, Joe," she said. "You're just some small-town cop. You're not one of these heroes from the pictures, right? I mean, you're not like Phillips. Remember Mr. Phillips? The big officer who works with you? He's a movie hero type. Big, strong. You're just a regular fellow with a pudgy belly. This type of stuff is a little over your head, I think. You see, this speech Ellen Hawthorne is going to give is kind of special. It's kind of the only hope for a lot of people who need hope, millions of Liberians, people just like you and me with families. So, you see, it is kind of a big deal that she gives the speech and you might require some professional help keeping her safe. I think we could hire a private security firm to show up at your home and protect her."

"No," Joe said. "*Nothing* is going to happen. She's just going to be staying here and then giving a speech. There's not going to be any trouble. This is going to go as smoothly as it possibly can go. We're not hiring anyone to help out."

"Please, Joe. Let's hire some professionals."

"Nope. I'm not going to hire people when I know this whole thing is not going to lead anywhere. Nothing is going to happen. I'm not hiring any help!"

"Why not? Why not hire some private security people, Joe? Just in case?"

"This is my operation, Nika. I do it the way I see fit. My rules."

"What about President Ellen Hawthorne?"

Joe pointed to the door and then lifted up his gun into the air. He smirked and shook his head. Then he sucked on his teeth and said: "Listen, lady. Anybody walks through that door is dead. As dead as Bill Clinton. D-E-A-D."

"Bill Clinton, the President? He's still alive for Heaven's sake."

"You know what I meant," Joe said, shaking his head. "Fine, as dead as George Washington. He's dead. We all know that. So, there you go. Anyone walks through that door and I'll make sure they are as dead as George Washington. D-E-A-D."

"You don't know a damn thing about what you're doing!" Nika shouted and stomped out of the house. Following her, at her heels, was Drex, the humanitarian linguist. Together, they would come up with their own solution.

"He doesn't know a damn thing about what he's doing!" Nika shouted at her husband as they drove home in their electric car. The car was plastered with leftist political stickers and reminders to recycle. She was at the wheel. "He doesn't know a damn thing! Doesn't know a damn thing about what he's doing! Idiot! Buffoon!"

"I know, dear, I know," Drex replied. "He's a drunk."

"This is damned ridiculous is what it is," Nika snapped. "Damned ridiculous, sweetie. A grown man acting like a TV movie hero. He thinks he's that cute guy from that movie. That's who he thinks he is! He thinks he's a hero!"

"Which movie, honey?"

"The one with the guy who has claws, claws springing out and then coming in and out of his hands over and over. Oh, I'm just flustered, sweetie. I'm just flustered! Idiot!"

"The Wolverine, honey. That's what they call that guy. The Wolverine."

"Yep, that's who he thinks he is. Idiot! Or Superman. Or Batman. Buffoon! Some sort of hero like that. He thinks he's frigging Batman! Idiot! Idiot!"

"Joe is no Batman, honey."

They drove on in silence. She shook her head from side to side. Drex turned on the radio and gospel music began to drown the car. Drex danced in his seat with a childish smile on his face. Nika interrupted his dance by turning off the radio and gazing at her husband with a look of severity.

"Baby," she said, "we have to do this thing ourselves. You realize that there is way too much at risk. We're talking about the lives of millions of people here. Waikiki Joe is too stupid to be able to protect this woman by himself. He's no hero. The man walks around in boxer shorts all days and forgets to wash his hands after he uses the bathroom."

"Yeah," Drex agreed. "He's gross. That was really something. I've never seen anyone actually do that in front of other people."

"We have to do this thing ourselves," she repeated. "All of Africa, all those babies, are counting on us, baby. We have to do this. This is our mission in the world. This is why we were born, to help people."

Drex nodded. He didn't know whether that was really his mission in the world. Maybe none of us had a mission. Perhaps all of us just floated around without any real purpose. But that didn't matter. He loved his wife and he would do anything to keep her happy. If that meant risking his life, so be it.

"But how? How do we do it?" he asked. "How do we help out?"

"Baby," she answered, "we get the guns ourselves. And when those killers show up to try to destroy President Ellen Hawthorne, the two of us help retire them. We shoot them until they are as dead as barbershop quartets. D-E-A-D."

"We k-k-kill them?" Drex stammered. He was a pacifist. "I've never killed anyone! That sounds like a horrible plan. Absolutely terrible. You want to kill people, sweetie? You want me to help you actually kill someone?"

"That's right," Nika replied. "We take these guys out, sweetie. We kill them. You're going to help, so toughen up. We smoke these clowns."

"Nika! We're professionals for God's sake! We go to work in suits and ties! I'm an academic and I haven't been in a fight since the seventh grade. If I recall, I got my butt handed to me that time by the other kid. He beat the living daylights out of me and stood over me and laughed and laughed. Then, he peed on me."

"He peed on you, honey?"

"It was to add to the humiliation, baby. It's something kids here in America do."

Nika stopped at a crosswalk and watched as some nuns led schoolchildren across the street. The crossing guard stood in the middle of the avenue holding a sign. The children seemed so innocent and her big heart couldn't help but expand at the sight of them. She was possessed by compassion. What about all the children in the world? Don't we owe them all something? Doesn't every child deserve a future? A reasonable life shouldn't be limited to a privileged few.

"I'm doing it," she said, throwing her big eyes at her husband. Those big eyes could make Drex move a mountain. "I'm doing it, sweetie. I'm helping out President Hawthorne. I'm going to help keep her safe. I have to."

"Oh, c'mon, sweetie," he begged. "Don't do it. Please!"

"I'm doing it," she repeated softly. "And you're doing it too."

Drex sighed and looked down at his hands. He loved his wife too much. That was his problem. If he had married a woman he hated he'd have been miserable but his life would have been more predictable. Predictability was good for a man like him.

"I'll do it too," he muttered, giving in to his heart. "Hopefully no crew of hitmen show up and everything goes according to plan. Joe said he wasn't expecting any hitmen. This whole thing might all end peacefully, without any drama."

"That's right," his wife whispered, caressing his hair. He leaned into her hand. "Maybe nothing will happen and it will all be o.k. No hitmen. Nobody is coming here to Stamford to do anything. It's all going to be o.k."

Back in Miami, however, the hitmen who would ruin Nika's hopes of a peaceful future were sitting at a table off in the corner, away from the humans with their unsatisfactory, factory-generated lives. The fast food customers, the products, were standing in line, waiting for their shot of grease. Kjawan was wolfing down a hamburger while Jenny was staring at A.J. intently, her mind focused on her child. Which was the father? A.J.? Kjawan?

"We hit them hard," A.J. said. He opened up his yellow suit coat and pointed to his gun in its holster. He was wearing a yellow suit coat with pink pants. It was Miami after all. If you didn't dress like a villain, you weren't dressing Miami style.

"We go in blasting," Kjawan added. "Leave no one alive."

"We let them relax a little. Give them a false sense of security. Let them start wondering whether we're coming at all, whether all of this will be peacefully brought to a pleasant end. Then, we just charge right in and blast them."

"Through the front door?" Jenny asked, incredulously.

"Maybe," A.J. replied. "Yeah, just like that. Good idea, I think. Right through the front door. No drama. No sitting around, talking about any plans."

Kjawan shook his head as if to indicate he disagreed but he was just shaking away cobwebs, the vestiges of guilt from a former life. There was no better way for him than simply charging right on in. Why make a plan when madness tends to dissolve such machinations? Why make a plan when the whole reason they were in this business was for the rush of gunning people down?

"Listen," Kjawan said, "we go through the front, but we need to get ourselves some serious gear. I'm talking the craziest stuff out there we can get our hands on. Machine guns, missile launchers, body armor, bows and arrows -"

"Bows and arrows?" Jenny interrupted, trying to keep herself from laughing. "Bows and arrows? Are you serious? Are you fucking kidding me? Who are we now – a band of marauding Indians? Seminole Indians on the warpath? Bows and arrows?"

"That's exactly what we are," A.J. said, nodding. "Marauding Indians. Good analogy. Perfect actually. That's exactly what we are. Seminole Indians on the warpath."

"Marauding Indians," Kjawan pronounced, shaking his head to emphasize the words. "That's right. That's the mentality, boys and girls. Marauding Indians. We go in there blasting, take everyone we can out like Apaches attacking wagons on a trail. We can take out a lot of people with bows and arrows but even more with some machine guns. I agree with Jenny that the bow and arrow idea is kind of nuts, but the underlying concept fits."

Kjawan was wearing a blue sweat suit and a baseball cap. The Miami sunshine filtered into the place through the massive glass windows. Jenny, wearing a black bikini, sipped on her soda demurely. She wasn't convinced that proceeding with such a blunt plan was better than something more carefully deliberated. Planning never hurt anyone.

"I'm pregnant," she said, suddenly, as if to emphasize a point no one understood.

The two men laughed, showcasing their sharp teeth. They gazed at each other and wondered what Jenny's statement meant. How could she be pregnant? She was a killer and so were they. Killer don't have families. Killers create victims and *destroy* families. They couldn't possibly create something, like a baby. They stopped smiling. She was serious. It wasn't a joke!

"Whose baby is it?" Kjawan asked. "Mine? It can't be mine."

"I don't know," she replied. She pointed at A.J. and then at Kjawan. "One of the two of you. Those are the only possibilities. I haven't been with anybody else."

"You sure?" A.J. asked. "I mean, you're sure about this? You're not guessing? Don't bring something up that could affect the mission unless you're sure."

"Yeah," she replied. "I'm pretty sure. Positive, actually. Absolutely positive. There is no doubt that I am pregnant."

“Well how the hell are we supposed to deal with *this*?” A.J. shouted, throwing his hands up into the air. The patrons turned to look at them. He smiled at them and turned back to the conversation. He wanted to strangle Jenny for possibly blowing their chances at moving up in the world.

“Keep it down,” she whispered. “You’re armed. Don’t call any attention to us. We don’t want some damned inquisitive officer showing up, asking questions.”

“Relax,” A.J. said. “No cops are in here. Just take it easy.”

“Exactly,” she said, nodding. “We all take it easy. We can handle this baby situation later. There’s no need to worry about it now. I’m still good to go as far as the job is concerned. It’s not going to change anything. We still do the job the same as any other. No complications.”

“Damn right,” A.J. hissed. He was almost foaming at the mouth. “Damn right! We don’t have time for babies and drama in the middle of a profitable mission representing millions of dollars. This is your problem and not mine. No one here cares about you and your baby. No drama. No baby drama. You never mention this again in front of me. I don’t care about you or your baby!”

“*Baby drama*?” Jenny asked, her voice cracking. She wasn’t expecting joy but wasn’t ready for such a cold response either. She got up and left the table. “I’ll meet you back at the hotel before check-out time. I’m going for a walk. I need to get my head straight. Everything...everything is alright. It’s all...going...according...to...plan...”

She walked out of the restaurant and into the sun. A.J. grimaced at Kjawan who seemed to be perfectly calm. He even threw A.J. a smile. A.J. raised his eyebrows at the smile. Hadn’t he just heard the same news he did? Didn’t he understand that the mission had just run into a possible road bump?

“Why are you so calm about this?” A.J. asked, pointing at his partner. “Didn’t you just hear her? She’s pregnant. This might ruin our whole crew. Hell, kids ruin everything.”

“Because there’s nothing we can do about it,” Kjawan answered placidly, in an almost Zen-like tone. There was no use worrying. “We do the job, take this lady out, and then we deal with this issue. The job comes first, above all other worries because that’s our ticket into the big leagues. Like she said herself just now, this piece of news doesn’t affect the job. We still take care of business, the exact same way we always have. That’s what is most important. We don’t sweat the small stuff. Focus on the big picture.”

“The job comes *first*,” A.J. repeated in agreement. “Always. Her and her drama don’t matter. I just don’t give a damn. I just don’t give two hairs off a rat’s head about her and her stupid child!”

They didn’t care. Jenny sat on the curb in front of a wood fence. Behind the fence was a carnival, a Ferris wheel rising and dipping out of sight. She could hear the screams of children, so happy that she could barely stand them. The sun was right above, beaming down. She sighed and picked up her cell phone. She needed to talk to someone.

“Hello,” a woman’s voice answered. “This is Dr. Nika Drex.”

“Hi, Dr. Drex,” Jenny said, sucking in her breath while she spoke. It was like diving into a time warp, like being sent back in time. “I know this is really weird but this is Jenny Anderson. Remember me? I was a freshman at Sacred Heart and you treated me for depression, suicidal thoughts. I had a suicide attempt. I’m not sure if any of this is ringing a bell? I just feel like the whole world is crashing down on top of me and I don’t know what to do. You were the only one I could think of calling. You’re the only person who’s ever treated me for any of my issues.”

She broke down into tears. She didn’t think she was capable of such feelings. She thought she had expurgated all these feelings from herself. It was a new sensation – *caring*. It felt warmer but at the same time so hot it burned. She didn’t like the feeling. It made her shaky, afraid that she was going to shed her skin and become something new.

“I remember you,” Nika replied, her voice professional yet displaying compassion. “Of course, I remember. I treat students, though, ma’am. You’re not a student anymore, Ms. Anderson. If you need help, the most I can do for you is refer you to a professional for

treatment. I would ask you to get help. If you think you need it, the wisest thing is to seek it. Do you need me to send you a list of professionals I recommend in your area?"

"Please?" Jenny pleaded, her hands shaking uncontrollably now. She just needed to talk. "Please just hear me out. I've never talked to anybody else. I-I n-need-d to t-talk-k!"

"I can't," Nika replied firmly. "I'm sorry, Ms. Anderson. I just can't because you're not my patient. I'm not allowed to treat you, ma'am. Not anymore. You're not a student. I'm sorry. I strongly recommend that you get help. You seem to need it. You really do, Ms. Anderson."

"I'm pregnant, Dr. Drex," Jenny said, wiping her eyes. "I-I'm pregnant and it's changing m-me in some k-kind of w-w-way I can't und-d-erstand-d."

"Congratulations. Change can be positive or negative depending on what you make of it, Ms. Anderson. I'm sorry to say that, as much as I wish I could, I still can't treat you."

"I don't know who the father is, Nika. Both of the men I've been sleeping with are bad men, the type of men who would rather eat a child rather than raise it, rather hang a baby than change diapers. They have no feelings! They have no hearts!"

"I'm sorry to hear that, Jenny. I have to keep stressing that I can't treat you. It sounds like you need a professional capable of sitting down with you to help you, capable of spending a long time with you. I can't do that."

"Do you remember when I tried to kill myself back in college, Nika? Back in Stamford? You kept me from trying again and I'm still here but you didn't really help me in the end. I was as confused when I left you as when I first started to see you. I stayed on the wrong path. I never veered back to normalcy. I stayed on the path of wrongdoing and hurting people – drugs, crime. Those things are who I am now, and I can't walk away from them. They've come to define me. They're like the air I breathe."

"We're defined by what we do, Jenny. We can always change the air around us."

"In that case, I'm a real piece of garbage because I don't really want to change," Jenny said, hanging up. She watched the cars drive past her, sitting on the curb, waiting for an answer to come to her, her head hanging down, her hair in her face.

No answer came. She was heading back to Stamford, to the place where the pain had first started to burrow into her chest and mute her other feelings. Back to Stamford, into something that didn't feel quite right, back to the beginning, to where she had killed her parents years before.

5. If You Want Peace, Prepare for War!

Rey had been a bad, bad man back in his old Army days. Army wrestling champ. Reputed combatant (one of the few from Gulf War I, as very few people saw any action at all in that conflict - they mostly pushed buttons). Yes, unfortunately Gulf War I had not been Gulf War II. In Iraq, the boys were mowing down people left and right like unruly shrubbery. In Kuwait, back in those beautiful, pristine days of the early 1990s, when good rock and roll was still on the radio and George H.W. Bush was the President and his son was some unknown Texan, there had been few direct confrontations against the supreme world power that had been America. He was one of the few guys who actually had seen an Iraqi face to face and killed him. He felt a sense of pride in having served his country.

"I killed that Iraqi," he said. "I did it for God and Country, my friend."

"Shot him right in the face, huh?" Joe asked. "Wow, that's something. I've never even fired my gun – well, except for a few times. Haven't thought about it much, though. Killed a couple guys. I think."

"Yep," Rey replied. "Shot him right in the face, that enemy soldier. I told him not to move first though. So, you can't really blame me. It was a sad thing, really. War is generally unnecessary but you do what you have to. You do what you need to do to survive."

"Right in the frigging face," Joe repeated. He had heard the story a million times. Still, it never got old. He wanted to serve the greater good, be a hero. He just needed some kind of cause to motivate him, something to get him off his rump. As soon as he found his cause, he would dedicate himself to it with complete concentration, apply himself. Maybe

this thing with President Hawthorne was that cause? Maybe this would cure his seemingly incurable laziness?

They were sitting by an inflatable pool in Joe's backyard listening to music on the radio. Some song about bubblegum and parties was playing, the sort of pop tune they always seemed to play on slow days. Joe was resting his feet on a twenty-four pack of beer and Rey was sitting on the lawn chair next to him, staring off into space, his mind in a foreign land, a foreign land he only saw now through the waves of alcoholic distortion.

"A bad man," Rey said. "A bad man, I was. A bad, bad mother. See that's why you need me on this mission, captain. A bad man. When the you-know-what hits the fan, I know I'll have some flashbacks. I'll go crazy, maybe. You could use a crazy guy like me around. Seriously. You need a guy who is unpredictable, dangerous, someone you can't really control, like that nutty guy in that show with the gray hair. In every group, there's always a guy like that because men like that are truly indispensable. They spice things up."

"Yep," Joe agreed. "I can see your point, Rey. I could most definitely use a man of your talents, of your temperament. You're a man of action, like me. Not a man of talk, like some of those voices rambling on and on when I turn on the tube, the talking heads. The world is filled with talkers, Rey. Filled with them, those darn talking heads. But a man like me – he doesn't do much talking. He does action. That's what I do, Rey. Action. And even more action."

"Action," Rey agreed, his voice dreamlike. "That's exactly it. Action. See, that's why you need me, Joe. You need me to help protect this diplomat Ellen Hawthorne because - "

"President," Joe corrected, self-importantly. It was important to know the title of your VIP when you were working security. "She's not a diplomat. A diplomat is just some fat fool who gets paid to talk and stuff. This lady is the actual President. The honest-to-goodness president of a nation, even though it's just a silly nation like Liberia. Not much of a nation."

"Yeah, that's a really silly nation. That nation makes Mexico, Columbia, and Cuba look like Sweden or Luxembourg, like some kind of first world paradise."

"Or Japan."

"Yeah," Rey said. "Japan is a pretty good country too. A lot of wealth there."

"Liberia is no Japan."

"No, it's more like some broken toilet that got made into a country. It stinks."

They laughed. They continued laughing until they were interrupted by the loud sound of a leaf blower. The neighbor, an old Indian man, was visible behind the wood fence. He was wearing protective glasses and black gloves. He saw Rey and Joe sitting in lawn chairs and turned off the leaf blower to speak to them. He liked to entertain himself by talking to dummies and they didn't get any dumber than these two.

"Hey, Joe," the man said, waving a gloved hand. "Nice day, huh? Doesn't get any better than a day like this. Makes a man feel glad to be alive!"

"Hey, Mr. Singh. How's everything going? You having fun being a doctor and everything, saving lives and all that? I bet you have a sense of purpose in life. I'm looking for my sense of purpose, and actually I think I might have found a purpose. I'm feeling motivated, like getting up and doing something. You feel like that every day?"

"Yes," the man answered in a thick Indian accent. "That part is going very fine, the being a doctor and saving lives part. The marriage part, not so good. My wife is a really mean old woman. The worst kind! How are you doing, my friend? You found a cause, huh? What have you been up to? Living the good bachelor life?"

"Protecting and serving," Joe replied, scratching his stomach. "Busy as usual. I have a President coming to stay at my house. From Africa. Liberia, to be precise. Just doing my part to make the world a better place, one person at a time. I'm keeping her safe, making sure nothing happens to her so she can go make a speech at the UN. I guess that's pretty important."

"Kicking bummy and taking names," Rey added. "That's what we've been doing, sir. And we're pretty good at it, if you ask me. Real pros."

"Saving the world," Joe continued, excited by Rey's declarations, "one important, crucial person at a time. That's the key, you see, Mr. Singh. When the murderers come to try

to kill the President of Liberia, I'm going to wax those killers like hair on an Armenian woman's back. I'm going to send them to an early grave!"

"Fuck yeah! And I'm going to help," Rey said. "That's what friends do, Mr. Singh. They help."

"We're gonna get a bunch of guns, Mr. Singh. I'm talking fucking pistols, shotguns, little pistols – all kinds of armaments. We're going to stock up on every kind of firearm you could possibly think of. We'll be prepared for war, just in case something happens. I don't think anything will happen – but if it does, those killers will wish they never heard the name *Waikiki Joe*."

"I have an AK-47!" Rey announced to no one in particular. "I'm going to get it from my basement and bring it over here! Plus, I have some old grenades. I'm bringing those over too. If these killers come, which the boy Alfred says they will, then they're going to start a war here in Stamford. We're going to turn this city into a bloody warzone, sir!"

"We're gonna get these murderers and send them to an early grave basically, Mr. Singh. In the process, we'll basically have helped saved the world or make it a better place. So, I guess I'm pretty important too. It's not just doctors and stuff who save people's lives. I save people lives too. I'm important."

"Me too," Rey added. "I'm important as well."

The neighbor yawned and smiled. He just needed a break from mowing. The truth was that he hated Waikiki Joe and his friends. He never let his kids speak to the chubby officer next door. Joe was a drunkard and a lecherous dog.

"Well, boys," he said. "Have fun. Don't go too crazy with all this gun monkey business. I'll see you guys around."

Then, he turned on the leaf blower and disappeared into his yard. Rey held out a high five and Joe slapped his hand. Then, he got them each a beer. Rey stretched to find the radio behind him and turned up the music. A song about a girl wanting to be a ballet dancer was playing. It was a very sad song. Rey tried to keep himself from crying.

In the gun shop across town, jazz was playing, not bubblegum pop. The counterman was wearing a flannel shirt and possessed a greenish smile. He had long, greasy hair and shifty eyes. The entire place seemed to be a large dustbin. All of the weapons were covered by layers of particles and the light just barely filtered in. The counterman bobbed his head to the tune. He loved the jazz classics.

"How long does it take to get a permit?" Nika asked.

The man shrugged. He scratched his armpit with one hand and sighed.

"Well," the man replied. His voice was scratchy. "If you go about it legally, it could take a couple months. You have to go through this whole safety course and everything. But, I'm having a gun show with a lot of antiques tomorrow morning. Older, collectible pistols and other firearms that are just as deadly. You can pretty much buy anything at a gun show without a permit. You just show up and pay cash."

"What kinds of things are you going to have at the gun show?" Drex asked, standing next to his wife, fidgeting nervously with his tie. "Anything good? Anything that could be used like in a serious gun battle type situation? I'm talking serious hardware."

"Damn!" the man exclaimed, excitedly. His eyes lit up. "Hot dog! Hot damn! Well, I'll just have about any damn thing you could want to get, sir! Let me show you something. Just a little preview of the type of stuff I'm talking about. I like you two! I like you!"

The man disappeared into the back room of the shop. The place was illuminated by a single light bulb hanging in the middle of the store. There weren't that many guns on display. It was a small gun shop. Ramblin' Rick's Discount Guns. A cat stretched lazily on top of the counter and jazz music kept playing from a small boom box.

"Thelonious Monk," Drex observed.

"I know," Nika said.

"He's good."

"I know. You know I love Thelonious."

The man returned carrying what appeared to be a small rocket launcher. He placed it on the counter. Then, he reached into his jeans to pull out a 1973 Ruger Vaquero. It was like

an old cowboy pistol. Drex grabbed the pistol and stuffed into his jeans. Then, he drew the pistol as if he was in a duel.

"This is pretty cool, sweetie," he said beaming like a little kid. "I feel like a gunslinger from the Old West, like one of those guys who would ride across the prairies with their cattle. I feel like an uncontrollable rebel!"

She rolled her eyes and took the gun from him. She handed it back to the storeowner and ran a long finger along the rocket launcher sensuously. The man watched her and tossed her a smile designed to seduce. His teeth were filled with holes. His breath smelled like rotten oranges. She scowled.

"This number here," she said. "How much does it cost?"

"Five hundred bucks, my brown piece of pumpkin pie," the storeowner answered. "Pretty cheap for a rocket launcher. Really cheap."

"Does it come with the actual rocket? Or do we have to purchase that separately?"

"Yes, of course it comes with the launcher and everything, ma'am. I also have some more stuff for you, my dark sugary delight. I'll go get it and bring it right back. Just a little preview, a little preview for the gorgeous lady."

The man disappeared into the back of the shop and returned carrying two Lahti L-39s. The man placed the two guns on the counter and smiled. Nika whistled in admiration. Her husband's eyes popped out of his skull. The guns were massive elephant killers.

"Lahti L-39s," the man said. "Finnish anti-tank rifles. They were developed to help destroy Soviet tanks during the Winter War between Finland and the Commies back in the late 1930s. Finns used to sit there in trenches holding these bad boys. When the Soviet tanks would show up, they would pull the trigger and blow the Reds into oblivion! One of these puppies could actually take out an old Soviet tank."

"Wow!" Drex exclaimed excitedly. "That is pretty cool. You have to admit it, sweetums, that is pretty neat. Wowza! This is so exciting!"

Nika had no time for boyish dreams of being a hero in war or a cowboy out on the frontier. She examined the firearms dispassionately and nodded approvingly. They were sufficient for the task at hand. They would do damage.

"Do you think this would be useful for defending a home against an assault?" she asked, searching the man's face. "Let's say some people were trying to break into a home to kill someone. Do you think this Lahti L-39 would be useful in protecting that home, sir?"

The man chuckled. He showed his green teeth again. He loved dealing with gun amateurs. They were impressed by heavy artillery but they didn't understand the full power of these tools. They were magical.

"Lady," he said, leaning over the counter as Thelonious Monk continued playing his piano in the background, "if someone tried to break into your home and you had one of *these* coldhearted bastards with you, you would have to get a real good cleaning service over to your place because pieces of them sons of bitches would be splattered all over the walls and the carpet like a Jackson Pollock painting."

As if to emphasize his point, the man reached into his front pocket, removed a cigarette and lit it. He smoked it as clouds surrounded him, looking satisfied. He was certain she hadn't expected a lowlife to know about Jackson Pollock.

"What time is the gun show?" Nika asked, unimpressed. "I definitely need to be there. I will bring quite a bit of cash with me."

The man handed her a card with the information. Then, Nika and Drex left to get something to eat across the street. They had been up all night talking about what to do with regards to the Hawthorne situation and now she needed to recharge her batteries.

Hunger. Dan Wentworth felt it as he sat across from the Russian at Picky Nicky's House of Pancakes in Nyack, New York, several miles from Stamford. He hadn't eaten all day. His stomach was rumbling. The waitress, a plump woman with her hair in a bun, greeted them and they asked for coffee and French toast. She scampered off without smiling.

"Seriously?" Wentworth asked, licking his lips. "Picky Nicky's House of Pancakes? You couldn't have picked an establishment more... more... classy or something? Instead,

you drag me into this plebe hell? I'm surrounded by men with their names on their shirts. It sickens me. I eat escargot, my friend, not fish sticks."

"These are your countrymen," the Russian observed. "You should be happy to be here with them. Are you not home? Is this not your land? Look around. This is America."

"Yes, you fat Eastern European fool. But I don't like to come to places like this. This is not my America, actually. A gentleman like me has standards. Aside from the fact that there are no cute boys here. Everybody is overweight. Look at all these fatties. It's disgusting, disheartening, and just plain sad."

Russian winced at the other man's comments. His pride as man from the underdeveloped world manifested itself in a sort of Russian machismo. He scratched his chin and growled disapprovingly. He hated acknowledging Wentworth's homosexual proclivities. They seemed to undermine his own masculine ones by association. He liked to pretend that Wentworth was not a homosexual but merely a man with fine tastes.

"We are here to talk business," the Russian said. "Not to talk about anything else. So, let's talk business. Let's not talk about no 'cute boys' or any of that!"

"What's there to talk about? The hit is going to get done. We hired killers, offered to pay them millions. These people are professionals. They are some of the best in the business. And more than that, they are unknown. Nobody has ever heard of this team. I've been grooming them. I've been giving them little deals here and there, letting them get better and better. I've been preparing them."

"For what? For what you 'groom' them?"

"For *this*! For precisely such a situation as we're facing today. This is what I do with my hit squads. I bring them up slowly until I'm sure that they can get the job done. You see, we can't afford another screw up this time. We tried to kill the Alfred kid, Ellen Hawthorne's boy, and we screwed it all up. That made me look bad, real bad. That Columbian couldn't have shot his way out of a paper sack. Turns out it was the guy's third hit and that the guy was a known assassin, with a name and everything despite his lack of experience. No more clowns like that."

"Your guys are different? They're special?"

"My guys have pulled off a heck of a lot of tough hits but no famous people. I've been giving them little jobs, a politician's mistress or someone who hit a millionaire's kid with a car by accident. Little jobs, to build them up. These guys are ready to break into the big time now. I've been preparing them for something like this, for a big job."

"They better be ready. Or it's our lives this time. General Thompson isn't going to tolerate failure a second time. You fail, your life is done. You're a dead man."

"It's *our* lives, honey cake. *Our* lives. Not just mine. Trust me, I know my guys will do the job right. They have to. I've been a contact for this team a long time. Besides, just in case they don't, you and I are going into town ourselves. We'll be there too to clean up."

"Us?" the Russian yelped in disbelief. That was the stupidest idea he had ever heard. "The two of us are going to be there the day of the hit? Are you crazy? We're the principals on the job!"

"Yes!" Wentworth nodded his head vigorously, laughing. "I am crazy!"

The Russian shook his skull in confusion. He gazed over at the table next to them. A chubby woman with blond hair and a bow sat across from a black man with a long mustache and glasses. They were both frozen, gazing at the Russian and Wentworth. The Russian smiled. The couple went back to eating as if they hadn't just heard an outburst.

"Yes," Wentworth whispered venomously. He truly was the King Snake. "We have to be there, ready to strike. Just in case. We have to be there on the day of the hit."

"But you're a fruitcake," the Russian observed. "What can you do? What sort of war can you wage, my friend? You would be a better interior designer!"

"Yes, sweetie, but this dandy is no joke. Trust me, boy. I can handle myself in a firefight. I know I can! And I know damn well that you can too. We have to be there, my friend. We have to be there just in case. Something goes wrong, we finish the job."

"But if this crew is full of professionals, why bother? Why would they need us if they are as good as you say they are? Are they not good?"

“No mistakes, handsome,” Wentworth said, shaking his head. He wasn’t going to risk his life. “No mistakes this time. We go to wherever Hawthorne is staying and we wait a couple blocks away in a car – hell we could wait right outside her home if we wanted to. The crew is supposed to call me once the deal gets done, once she’s dead. If we don’t get a call, we take care of business ourselves, charging in there and putting a bullet in Ellen Hawthorne’s uppity head. We bring heavy artillery. I’m talking Uzis, Ak-47s, the whole deal. I’m talking heavy, heavy artillery. We show up ready to wage war.”

The Russian nodded. Then, he cut into this French toast and stuffed pieces of it into his mouth. Wentworth sat watching with a pleasant smile planted on his face. Watching the Russian eat disgusted him. The Russian’s teeth were a horrible mess, like something you might find in the back woods of Alabama or – worse! – in Africa. The Russian looked like a damned redneck!

The redneck extended his hand. He was wearing a stained t-shirt and torn shorts with sandals. His hair ran down his back into a ponytail. His boots were muddy. His hands were stained with black grease. He had a calm air about him.

“I’m Bill,” he yodeled. “That’s what you can call me. Bill.”

“Call me Flower Man,” A.J. said. Then he pointed to Jenny and Kjawan, standing behind him holding hands. “These folks here are Flower Girl and Flower Boy. That’s what you can call them.”

“Some names,” the man muttered. “At least Bill sounds more real. Not that it’s my real name either. I’ve never given anyone my real name in my life. Hell, it doesn’t matter, though. Come on.”

Bill motioned for A.J. to follow him and the four of them walked into a cornfield behind a farm house. They walked through the field until they reached a clearing with a trailer. Bill stopped to point at the trailer and A.J. nodded. He looked back at Jenny and Kjawan and smiled reassuringly. A nice, hidden location in some cornfield behind a farmer’s house. No one would interrupt their perusal here.

The trailer was small, one large room and a bathroom, and the floor was covered by an assortment of firearms, some small, others massive. There was a beer-stained sofa and a television on a stand. A soap opera was playing on the TV, the unusually beautiful actresses fighting over a dolt with a coiffed head of hair. There was another man inside, his body red, burnt by the sun, tattoos on his arms. He had sandy blond hair and stood shirtless in the trailer, wearing only a pair of slacks. His stomach sat over his crotch.

“This is Travis,” Bill said, pointing at the sunburnt man. “He’s in this thing with me.”

Travis nodded without saying a word. Bill pointed to the couch and A.J., Jenny and Kjawan sat down uneasily. They gazed over the multitude of firearms while Bill stood by the door and Travis stood at the other end of the trailer, chewing on his lower lip.

“Pick what you like,” Travis finally said, chewing and chewing, his eyes droopy. He was under the influence of prescription pills. “I’ll tell you the price. Everything here is top quality. Nothin’ here is traceable. Guaranteed. These guns come from North of the border some of them, South of the border others. Most from South of the border. Each has a different story but none of them have anything that can be traced. No one will ever use these to get back to you guys – and they’re all guaranteed to work. Guaranteed.”

Bill nodded in agreement and added, “These are top guns right here, a lot more expensive than the ones you get at the store but a lot better in some ways. Some of these guns you can’t even really buy in the States. Some of them you can’t buy anywhere, really.”

Kjawan picked up a Taurus Rossi Model 971 and held it. He liked the weight. Jenny picked up a shotgun and held it in both her hands. A.J. saw something amidst the piles of guns and approached it. They admired the firearms lovingly, like the child they didn’t want.

“Is this an M134?” A.J. asked, his voice almost a whisper.

“A Gatling-style gun,” Travis responded, smiling. He knew they would like that weapon. “Rotating barrels. 6,000 rounds per minute. Six barreled. You start shootin’ with that thing, you best be in a war – and if you’re in a war, you’re sure as heck not going to leave any of the enemy alive. You’ll end up killing everything in front of you. Bet on that.”

"Pick it up," Bill instructed, grinning. He wanted the man to feel how portable it was. Most people assumed such weapons to be heavy. "Go ahead, pal. Pick it up."

"It's light!" A.J. exclaimed, holding the machine gun in his arms. "Surprisingly light."

"For you maybe," Bill chuckled. He was complimenting the customer, a great tactic to sell your wares. "It's about 65 pounds, pal. Takes at least a minute or so to set up. We have special cartridges for that if you need them. We're a fully stocked shop here, fella. Anything you need, you just tell us."

"We sell ammo too," Travis said, pointing to a closet. "Armor piercing, whatever you need. All types of cartridges. Anything you need, we have it. Guaranteed."

Kjawan got off the couch and approached the armaments. He picked up some grenades and held them in his hands. He tossed one at Jenny and she caught it, throwing him a look of displeasure. He smiled at her nonchalantly.

"At least the pin is still in it," she said. "That's better than blowing me up."

"How much for those?" Kjawan asked Bill. "I love grenades. They do the job like nothing else. I've only used them a couple times but they've worked every time."

"Depends on what else you buy. We can give you folks a real good deal. I mean, our goal is to get repeat business from you. We want you to keep coming back."

A.J. nodded and said, "Let's say that I want to buy six of those Taurus pistols, the M134 Gatling style gun, and six of those grenades. What would you say, Bill? What would you say to that?"

"I'd say you were preparing to pull some kind of terrorist plot," Bill answered, seriously. "I'm not about to get caught with some national security Islamist bull right about now. That stuff is way too hot. I sell to folks that do more regular types of things. What are you folks planning? I'm just asking here."

Jenny sauntered over to the man and placed a hand on his chin. She smiled and gave him a soft kiss. The man's eyes grew wide and he stepped back. Travis's mouth flung open. Why couldn't she have kissed him? He hadn't kissed a woman in years.

"Do we look like terrorists?" she asked. "Do you think I'm a terrorist?"

"N-no," Bill stammered. "No, miss, you don't seem like one. I-I'll give you guys a good deal on all this stuff, ammo included. How does that sound? I'll get you guys the best deal I can, especially since you have such a pretty lady here with you."

"It sounds fabulous Billy," Jenny purred. "Absolutely fabulous. Thank you, Billy."

They placed the guns into the back of the pickup truck and covered them with a tarp. Then, they climbed inside. A.J. sat behind the wheel, Jenny in the middle, and Kjawan at the door. A.J. started the car and they began the drive. There were only trees this far out of the way, this distant from civilization. No one thought to build anything where only fields and the occasional grain silo sprang forth from the ground.

"Only a couple hours to Stamford," A.J. muttered, tired already. He wanted to get the job over with, to get the money as fast as possible. "Almost there, people."

"How are we going to do this thing?" Kjawan asked, staring out the window. They hadn't talked about a plan. The ideology of living without plans seemed sillier and sillier the closer they got to their target. "Are we really just going to charge into a cop's home? Is that the plan, really?"

"Yeah. Pretty simple, *really*. We just go in blasting and we kill everything in sight, that's it. Who do you think is going to be inside that house – the devil? Some fat cop with a silly-sounding Hawaiian name. You afraid of him? Maybe you're afraid of this Hawthorne lady. She sounds pretty scary. You afraid of women?"

"I'm not afraid of anything," Kjawan responded angrily. His blood began to feel warm inside his temples. "I'm just trying to figure out what the strategy is. I mean, I know that planning is not your thing, but maybe we should make an exception. Maybe we should actually plan this one."

"Look," A.J. emphasized, his irrational anger barely hid under a civil tone, "there is no plan, my good friend. I hate plans. Hate them. I'm a dog who goes after bones, here. We show up with our guns and we kill every person we see. Finito. We kill the cop, we kill the lady. If the kid Alfred is there, we kill the kid too. We kill everyone we can. Every single

person in there. Period. It couldn't be any simpler. We've got body armor, guns, everything we need. This is what I do – I kill because I enjoy it. I don't plan because I don't care if I live or die. No plans."

They drove on in silence for a few seconds. Something occurred to Kjawan and he couldn't get it out of his mind. There was a factor no one had accounted for. The cop. Who was this cop? What if he was a veteran, someone who could handle combat?

"Who is this Waikiki Joe?" he asked, speaking his mind. "We don't know anything about the guy, really. We know he's a cop from Stamford, Connecticut, but that's about it. There has to be a reason that the kid called this particular cop. It couldn't have just been random. This guy must be dangerous."

"No, there isn't a reason. Thinking and reasoning is not what we do. We don't look for reasons. The kid is a professional fighter and he had a fight up in Connecticut. Some guy comes to try to kill the kid – probably the same people paying us to do this job – and the kid is out of his mind on steroids. The kid ends up killing the killer. Probably the craziest thing that ever happened in this town. The kid ends up trusting this cop and the cop helps him out of a jam. A bond is formed. There you go. End of story. The kid called the cop because the cop got him out of a jam."

They drove on in silence. A.J. lit a cigarette and smoked it angrily. He turned on the radio. An old country song was playing. They listened until Jenny reached over and turned the knob. She'd had enough noise for a day. She was sick of listening to Kjawan demanding a plan and A.J. rejecting any such notion over and over again. She was sick of country music and the past it recalled inside her, sick of country people and isolated locations.

"Why'd you shut the radio off?" A.J. asked, reaching for the knob.

She intercepted his hand and moved it away. Then, she pulled out the ashtray and grabbed his cigarette, putting it out. She had a baby coming. She was realizing more and more that the baby's life was more important to her than she had anticipated.

"I'm pregnant," she said firmly. "You don't smoke around pregnant women."

"So now you're going to ruin everybody's day, mamma?" A.J. asked, his voice full of venom and sarcasm. "You're pregnant. That's great. Just leave me out of it. You can have your little baby on your own, sweetheart. Don't bring it up around me."

Jenny shrunk down into her seat, pouting. Kjawan put an arm around her and brought her closer, comforting her. A.J. shook his head in disapproval, despising such a display of sentimentality. Yes, they were becoming sentimental. They were becoming human and that displeased him. Humans get killed where wolves thrive.

"Some traveling companions you guys are," he muttered as it started to rain, the drops smashing against the windshield and exploding like tomatoes dropped off a balcony. "One worries about surviving the hit and the other worries about her baby. Who cares? Who cares if we live or die? Hell, I wouldn't care if we found a three-hundred pound man made out of pure muscle in that house, armed to the teeth. I don't worry. I'd just kill him. You worry, you start to have too many feelings. You start to feel too much, this job becomes impossible and you melt into the rest of them. Then...this whole thing we've build...it just ends..."

Back in Stamford...

Lee Phillips III was huge, upwards of three hundred pounds of pure muscle. He stood in his boxer shorts, shirtless, his eyebrows raised and his eyes fixed on Joe, standing in his living room wearing a suit and tie. Phillips never wore a button-down shirt and tie if he could help it. He had to shop at the big and tall and everything fit funny.

"I need you, Phillips."

"I don't know, Joe. Sounds like crazy talk this whole mission thing you're on."

"I *need* you. You're the biggest guy I know."

Phillips lived in a comfortable house in the middle of the wilderness, far enough outside the city that he could see stars at night. His home looked more like a small log cabin used for vacations than an actual home. Various plaques and trophies adorned the place alongside pictures of Phillips wrestling in ridiculous getups. High school wrestling. Pictures playing football in the park wearing a red bandanna with yellow polka dots. One ridiculous outfit after another.

"This sounds crazy, Joe. I mean, it really just sounds nuts."

"Listen, Phillips, you're the biggest, baddest cat in this whole town. You really are, boy. You're a frigging machine and I need you with me. Now, you're gonna take my heart and stomp on it like that, spit on it? You're going to leave me like some prom girl whom you promised to take to prom but never did? You're going to break my heart? That's not you."

"I never promised to take you to the prom, Joe. I'm not even sure what all those analogies are supposed to mean."

"You're missing the metaphor, Phillips. The point is that you're the biggest, baddest man I know and you're acting like a coward by refusing to aid me in my mission to keep the President of Liberia safe from harm's way. That's all I'm saying. Who does that? Some kind of coward, obviously – only a coward would do that. You've turned into a damn coward, Phillips."

Phillips listened attentively, a hand on his chin. On the one hand, he *was* a hero. He had been captain of the wrestling team. He had been one of the top graduates from the academy. He had fought long and hard to stay in shape after leaving the academy, even as other officers succumbed to fast food and alcohol. He lived his life with a code.

"That kid Alfred is a doper," Phillips observed. "You can't trust dopers, Joe."

"A doper? He doesn't do drugs. I've never even seen him smoke a cigarette!"

"Steroids, Joe. He killed that guy because he was on steroids. He was on drugs."

"The guy was trying to kill *him*. What was he supposed to do, Phillips? Just lie down and let him snuff him. Of course not. The kid did right. He stood up for himself and took out the guy trying to take him out. Now, he needs your help. This thing is bigger than him and we're not going to leave it to some amateur security firm from out here in Stamford to take care of something so frigging important."

"HMMMMMM. I don't know."

"*What?* I need you!"

"Heck, I'll do it. The President of Liberia needs me. You need me. I'm up for it. I'll help out, Joe. You can count on me, always."

"They're a poor country. They need the help, Phillips. Do you need any guns or anything? We have so many guns you would not believe. We're prepared for a war here. All you have to do is tell me the model you need. I can get you anything you could want. Any gun in the world."

"I'm all set," Phillips said. "I've got enough guns in my basement to invade a country by myself. I've been a collector for a while now. I'm fully fucking stocked."

Phillips placed his hands on his hips and laughed a deep, hardy laugh. He continued laughing, the sort of laugh that only a man that big can produce. Then, without warning, he stopped and looked at Joe, his eyes popping out of his skull. He was full of testosterone and adrenaline now. He was getting excited by the idea of going to war.

"I'll kill them *all*, Joe. I'll kill them *all*! Christmas is coming to town a little early this year, Joe. I've got machine guns, all kinds of stuff you wouldn't believe! You made the right choice asking me for help! Let me show you what I've got, pal! Follow me!"

They went down into Phillip's basement and opened up several boxes. Phillips pulled a shotgun out of one box and smiled like a parent surveying a child out on a soccer field. He kissed the gun. It was one of his very favorites. Of course, he loved all his guns. He just loved some of them a little bit more than others. He had his babies.

"This is what I'm talking about," Phillips said, planting a kiss on the barrel. "This is what we need right here. We need my good baby for this. This gun is my baby. I love my baby. I love my baby so much."

"What else do you have in these boxes?"

"Joe, I've got everything we need. Trust me. I'm an army warehouse. Ready for war!"

"Where did you get this stuff, Phillips?"

"On the internet. Most of it. Most of it is legal. Some of it is close to legal but not quite. A little bit of it is not quite legal. Other things are blatantly illegal. You know how it is. Don't you, Joe? You know what it's like to love your little metal friends?"

Joe pulled what looked like a backpack out of a box. The backpack had a large gas tank. Attached to the gas tank was a hose that led to a sort of gun without barrels. There was a trigger on the tip of the hose, near the spout.

“Is this a frigging flame thrower, Phillips? Seriously? A flame thrower? You have a flame thrower in your basement, Phillips.”

“Yep. It’s an M2 flamethrower. Used during WWII. It’s an antique. Worth a pretty penny, Joe. Be careful with it.”

“Jeeze Louise. That’s pretty amazing, Phillips. Does it actually work?”

“Does it work?” Phillips repeated sarcastically, offended, feeling like someone had slapped his favorite son on the face. “You think I’m going to have what? A fake flamethrower in my basement? What kind of wimp do you take me for? This is the real deal. I’ve tested on plastic dummies. It works! Trust me, pal.”

“Plastic dummies?”

“You can get them from trash bins outside department stores. You set up the plastic dummy like he’s a real person and then you melt his face off.”

Joe moved to another box and pulled out some metal ninja stars. He threw one of them into the concrete. The star was sharp enough to stick. There it was protruding from the wall. Ninja stars. Phillips had ninja stars!

“You throw one of those bad boys at someone, you’ll split his head open,” Phillips observed. “Heck, the star might go straight through his head and hit the guy behind him. They’re that sharp. I sharpen them all the time when I’m down here.”

Joe nodded.

“I used play football, Phillips. Back in Hawaii, where I’m from. That means I have an arm like a catapult. I could toss a pillow through someone’s head. With a ninja star? Well, let’s just say that I could hit a kid in China from here and have it go through his head and the head of the dog he’s eating.”

“Dang,” Phillips said, impressed. “That’s good. That’s really good.”

“I’m a strong guy. Don’t doubt it. Believe it.”

“I do. I do believe it.”

“How could you not?”

“You’re the man, Joe. You’re the man.”

“I know. I know it, Phillips.”

“You’re the man, Joe.”

“Yep. I am the man.”

Down in Miami, many miles away...

Alfred was sitting down with another man in preparation for the bloodbath he knew would surely come. The man with the sleeveless multicolored shirt – a virtual bouquet of red, green, yellow and blue swirls – and pink shorts didn’t have a name. He was just known as Groovy. He looked like a surfer with his long blonde hair intermixed with strands of grey and his protruding goatee. He had an earring on one of his ears. He slurred his words as he spoke. He was obviously quite high.

“You get yourself to this locker,” Groovy said, his tongue pressed against his teeth, his fingers fidgeting, “and your stuff will be there. I guarantee it.”

“The locker is right in the airport?” Alfred asked skeptically. “It’s not in some far off location? It better not be across town. It’s in the airport, right?”

The man nodded, refusing to speak, and handed Alfred a key. The locker number was carved onto the gold body. Groovy crossed his legs and waited. He knew the boy had more questions. He didn’t want to answer them. He wanted to get back to the beach.

“My guns will all be there?” Alfred inquired, emphasizing the point. “Just like you said? No hassles, right? My guns will be there...”

“Every last one you ordered, Alfred. My connects up there in New York will put it all in the locker for you. Just pull the bag from the locker and walk out. You have my word. Everything will be ready to go.”

“What about my steroids? I might need them. I mean, they helped me before.”

Groovy sighed and placed his hands on his knees after unfolding his legs and leaned forward. He didn't get the kid but he didn't need to. He just needed to make some money. That's all. If the kid wanted steroids for a hit, he could have them.

"I'll never understand why you would need steroids for a job. That's what it sounds like you're doing anyways – a hit. I mean, it's none of my business. To tell you the truth, I don't even know if this is a hit or something more sinister, Alfred. I'll tell you one thing, though – Groovy *always* keeps his word when he gives it out. Always. If I tell you that the stuff will be there, well, as sure as dung floats up to the surface of a swimming pool it's going to be there. I guarantee delivery. It will all be there!"

"Good. I appreciate that, Groovy. I need everything to go okay on this."

"Just one question though, son. Are you planning on taking on some kind of army or something? I mean, a fella comes to me and asks me for this many guns, I stand back and ask myself – is he going to the Balkans? Or maybe Afghanistan? I mean, you asked for three pistols, a small sawed off shotgun and some explosives as well as a bulletproof vest. Usually, for a hit, a guy will ask for just one gun. You didn't ask for just one gun, Alfred."

"Well, I need more than one gun. I think I need as many as I can get."

"Yeah, well, like I said. It's unusual. Anyways, I got something else for you."

"Oh?"

Groovy nodded and reached into a pocket, removing a small plastic bag containing pills. He shook the bag in front of Alfred's nose and smiled deviously. Three pink pills with smiley faces engraved on them. Big pills.

"Ecstasy," Alfred observed, unsure about how to react.

"Ecstasy. Trust me, son. I've pulled off enough assassinations in my life to know what helps and what doesn't. This stuff helps. I used to take these puppies all the time back when I was a bit younger, you see. Now, you might have to stick these puppies up your wazoo to walk past the dogs at JFK, but you take a couple of these bad boys before a job and, along with those steroids you bought, you'll be flying high and ready to annihilate anything in your path. Trust me. Hell, you'll leave a crater the size of the Titanic behind you if you're this full of junk. It's ideal."

Alfred took the pills and placed them in his pocket. Then, he placed the suitcase on the table between them and opened it. He turned it towards Groovy and let him count the money like a greedy troll. Alfred waited patiently, turning away from the greedy eyes of the villain counting bills. He gazed at the walls of the apartment. It was a typical Miami pad with white stucco walls decorated with black and white photographs of Miami Beach.

Groovy looked up and nodded, extending his hand. They shook and Alfred walked past a kitchen counter towards the door. He wanted to get out of there as fast as possible, before he could get tricked into buying something else.

"Hey wait!" Groovy cried out, his voice shrill.

Alfred turned around hesitantly, half expecting to get shot.

"What?"

"Good luck. Don't die."

"Thanks, pal."

He turned back around and left. As he waited for the elevator, he could hear Groovy singing a Motown tune. Alfred just prayed that his guns would be there and that they would all work. You can never trust gun dealers. Gun dealers saw customers as scabs – you rip them off and let them bleed.

In colder New York...

They were waiting for a gun dealer. Dan Wentworth rubbed his hands together nervously while the Russian smoked calmly sitting in the seat next to him. They were listening to the country music channel quietly, in a Lincoln, the window rolled down.

"Do you have to smoke in the car?" Wentworth asked impatiently.

The Russian looked at him in apparent surprise. The surprised was feigned. The Russian liked to toy with his friend. The whole reason he smoked inside the vehicle was to piss off Wentworth.

"Yes," he replied. "I do."

“Why?”

“Why?” the Russian repeated. He looked at his cigarette in confusion and said, “It calms me down. *You* could use a smoke yourself. You want one?”

Dan Wentworth was about to tell the Russian that the smell of cigarettes in a car was one of the worst smells in the world. It was one thing to smoke outdoors, but in a car with another person it was a whole other thing. He was interrupted, however, by the arrival of an unmarked white van.

A scrawny fellow in his seventies with a shiny bald head left the van, hopping out of it like a frog escaping a predatory bird. Dan Wentworth immediately recognized him and nodded to the Russian. The Russian threw his cigarette onto the parking lot concrete and they left the Lincoln together. As they approached the skinny man, the fellow’s face broke into a smile. He had surprisingly nice teeth for such a weathered exterior.

“Danny Wentworth,” the gun dealer said, extending his firm hand. “It’s been a long time. Hell, I haven’t seen you since the old days when you were just a little pipsqueak. Remember those days, boy?”

“A lot has changed since the Cold War,” Wentworth answered, his face tight, his eyes fuming. “I’m not a water boy anymore. I play in the big leagues now. For myself, mostly.”

The man gazed at him with a strange glance, a condescending glance. Wentworth understood immediately that the man was mocking him. He wasn’t taking him seriously, still thought of him as Little Danny, the small time operative.

“I’m not little Danny Wentworth anymore, old timer. I make more money in a year than your old face could make in twenty years. Now, do you have my stuff or not? I’m not here to chit chat with you. Get to it.”

The man continued smiling with that mocking air. The man saluted and then bowed. He scoffed and brushed some dust off his shoulders. Then, he gave them a thumbs up.

“Of course, little Danny,” the man replied. “Little Danny Wentworth is a big shot now. Jeeze, homosexuals like you are doing hits these days? The world is changing, boy. First, they let you guys marry and now this! I can’t believe it. Progress, I suppose. Either that or everything is falling apart.”

Danny advanced towards the man but the Russian stopped him with a solid arm. The Russian shook his head as if to indicate *Don’t do this. We need this guy*. Without this old timer, they wouldn’t be able to get their weaponry. They needed those guns.

“Take us to the merchandise,” the Russian said, turning to the old timer. “We don’t want to talk. We want to do business. Let’s do business.”

“All right, Stalin,” the old man joked, scoffing again. He didn’t like foreigners either. “Follow me to the back. It’s all right here for you. Trust me.”

They didn’t trust him but they followed the old man, Wentworth mumbling to himself. The man opened the back of the van and pointed to a large sack. The Russian reached in and pulled the bag out. He gazed into it and saw the guns inside. Almost everything they needed was in there.

“Four pistols and two machine guns,” the old man said. “Couldn’t get any of the other things you wanted on such short notice. Sorry about that.”

“What about the body armor?” the Russian inquired. “You get that?”

“It’s in there. At the bottom.”

Wentworth walked over to the bag and made sure that all of the items he needed were inside. Then, he reached into his suit coat and pulled out an envelope. The old man opened the envelope and went through the bills silently. Then, he looked up and nodded. Danny and the Russian walked away, the Russian carrying the bag.

“Thanks, twinkle toes,” the old man called out. “I’ll see you around. It’s nice to see you found yourself a new boyfriend!”

Wentworth turned around, his eyes two lighthouses. His fists were clenched and his teeth shattered against each other. He steadied himself and looked at the old man with a putrid grin. His mind was alive with thoughts of torturing the old man.

“Yes, we will see each other around,” Danny Wentworth said, his voice steady. He was in control. “I’m coming by to pay you a visit when all of this is said and done, don’t you worry. We’ll see each other real soon. Real soon.”

The old man chuckled.

"Well, little Danny, if you're gonna kill me you better do it quick or mother nature is gonna do it for you. I'm on my way out already. Hell, I might be out before the month's up."

Then, the old man got in his van and drove away. The Russian put the sack into the back seat of the Lincoln and they climbed inside.

"I really hate that guy," Wentworth grumbled as he started the car.

"Really?" the Russian asked sarcastically. "He seemed like a nice guy."

Wentworth laughed and sped out of the parking lot. They had business to take care of in Stamford. They had an assassination to monitor. Ellen Hawthorne was going to die. She needed to die. At all costs.

In Africa, much hotter than the Northeast...

Ellen Hawthorne sat in first class with a newspaper. She hated flying. There was always the fear that some rebel could come out of the woods and shoot a missile at the plane. In Liberia, Presidents do not have private military planes. There is no Airforce One. Presidents fly around like anyone else. Hell, they used to fly coach back in the 80s.

She looked out the window at the airport in Lagos. From here, it would be a short flight to Rome and then a connecting flight out to New York City. Then, she would meet her son at the airport and they would drive off in a rental car to Stamford. Her son had said that no one could be trusted. Talk to no one, he had said. They had to keep her out of the city, had to keep her somewhere they could watch her, somewhere without strangers.

Waikiki Joe? Who was Waikiki Joe? Some cop her son had run into when he had been in trouble a while back. Now, the entire future of Liberia, a nation, was in the hands of a local police officer in some smallish American town. Stamford? She had never even heard of the place. Then again, she didn't know much about America. Only that Alfred seemed to like it there and didn't want to leave. She reached into the front pocket of her pantsuit and removed a picture. There he was, wearing braces.

"Alfred," she whispered, rubbing the picture with her thumb. "My beautiful boy. I miss you so much. Was your childhood here really that bad? Was I such a bad mother? I tried to care for you, my little prince. I really did."

"Is that your son?" the man sitting next to her asked. He was an American. Brown-skinned, perhaps Indian. There was a small Indian community in Nigeria. Perhaps he had been visiting friends. "He looks like you."

"Yes," she replied, smiling. Her eyes were full of pride. "He lives in the United States and I'm going to visit him. I should be able to be with him very soon."

"Has it been a long time? I mean, since you last saw him?"

"Yes," she said, her voice weighed down by sadness. "Too long. Too long. Africa sometimes is a cruel mother, isn't she? She takes her children and eats them up like little drops of candy or something like that. Others she spits out into the world and we never hear from them again until many years later. They go off to live in Miami and study and become professional boxers."

"Our children," the man nodded in agreement. "They are a source of stress, aren't they? I have several of my own. I couldn't live without them. You going to America on business too or just pleasure? Just to see your boy?"

"I'm going on business too. But it will be a real pleasure to see my son."

The man nodded pleasantly and went back to his book. Ellen Hawthorne bowed her head and prayed silently. She was unsure of how this entire thing would play out. Even if she addressed the UN and they sent troops to help stabilize the country, what would the Americans and Europeans want from her in return? Someone once told her that nothing in the world comes for free – or even at cheap prices. There is always a hidden cost. They would want something in return for the peacekeepers.

She would be in New York in a matter of twelve hours. She hoped for peace but knew that what awaited her was war. Her visit to the United States would most likely turn out a bloody one. In the end, violence could present itself in the most unlikely places just as readily as it showed itself when and where it was expected. War was universal.

War. Jenny gazed at herself in the mirror in the bathroom of the truck stop. Her eyes looked sunken. She had not gained weight. She had lost it. She vomited into the sink and turned the water on. She splashed water on her face. She was headed for a war, following a man who refused to make plans and could care less about whether she lived or died.

"I'm pregnant," she whispered. Then, she repeated the words over and over again. "I'm pregnant. I'm pregnant. I'm pregnant. I'm pregnant. I need to get out of this thing. They don't care. They don't care about themselves much the less do they care about someone like me. I'm pregnant. I'm pregnant. I'm pregnant. I'm pregnant."

There was a knock at the door. It was A.J.

"What are you doing in there?" he yelled unsympathetically.

"Nothing. I'll be right out. I promise."

"We have to get a move on! We don't have time for delays."

She wiped her face with some paper towels and opened the door, venturing out into the world. She had decided that she hated A.J. Hated him with a passion. A.J. did not care whether he lived or died and, thus, refused to strategize, refused to plan for anything more than a mad charge. In truth, A.J. wanted to die. So did Kjawan. He wanted to die too. As she walked to the car, a thought occurred to her – she didn't want to die yet. She wanted to live.

6. Ready to Rock n'Roll, Baby

The sun was rising, illuminating the rows and rows of houses lined up like boxes in a warehouse. This was sprawling suburbia in its true sense and the putrid sight of it made Wentworth shiver with anxiety. He had been raised in a homely place just like this one, where neighbors waved at other neighbors as they happily cut the grass on lonely sunny mornings. He had hated it then and he hated it just as passionately after reaching middle age.

They were sitting in the Escalade, across from a small home with a fence and brown, unkempt grass. The place looked like it could be any home in any suburb anywhere in America. It had a comfortable desolation to it. The Russian was whistling and Wentworth was chewing on gum nervously. They had been there for a few hours now, just waiting for the storm to come.

"So what's the plan?" the Russian finally asked, ceasing his tune. "Are we just going to sit here all day or are we actually going to talk about this thing? I think we should talk about it."

Wentworth turned to him and pretended that he held a gun in his empty hand, extending his finger like a barrel. He pointed the finger at the Russian and imitated the sound of a gun firing. He repeated the same action a few more times, to emphasize the point.

"We just go in shooting," Wentworth said. "That's the plan."

"So, we don't have a plan. When? When do we go in shooting?"

"Not when, *if*. If everything goes according to plan, we just sit here all pretty. Just you and me listening to some tunes in the car. But *if* things start to get really nasty and the folks in that house start shooting like crazies freshly freed from the asylum and somehow they manage to take out the crew we brought in for the job...well, that's when you and I go in there and finish the job. You get me? We're just the clean-up crew."

"The main squad will not fail. You said these were talented killers. We're not going to have to do anything," the Russian whispered, placing all his hopes into that statement. He was too old for a shootout, too old to see blood spilled face-to-face.

"Really good, this group. Really clean. Really professional. But this kid Alfred already took out a trained, well-known Columbian mass murderer and who knows what can happen this time around. You and I, my good Soviet friend, are here as the insurance policy. One way or the other, the kid and his mom die here today."

"So, we just sit and watch the house. We wait. If everything goes according to plan, we never leave the car. We just drive off. We only go in if we have to. Is that right?"

"You got it. Like I've told you one million times."

"What if we have to go in? We just start shooting?" The Russian was sweating.

“Then, I’ll tell you what my friend...we’re gonna go in there shooting up a storm bigger than any explosion this world has ever seen. It’s gonna be like Jesse James returning from the dead.”

The Russian smirked. He liked that last part. He was nervous, sweaty, shaky for some reason he couldn’t understand, but he liked the idea of becoming a great, courageous American cowboy. He wished he had shown up wearing a belt buckle and some black cowboy boots. Then, he’d be really ready.

The matador ensemble was ready to strike, ready to send the African bitch into an early grave. A.J. parked down the street, about four cars away from a black Escalade with two men inside it. *Probably two gays*, A.J. thought, *sitting in a car, getting romantic*. There were people strolling down the sidewalk with their dogs like it was any other day, not knowing about the nuclear bomb about to go off. Two old Italian-looking women stood in a driveway discussing life in Stamford, gesticulating and squawking like flamingos.

“That’s the place,” he said, pointing to the house. “That’s it right there.”

Jenny felt her stomach churn but she knew it wasn’t the pregnancy this time. She didn’t like this one bit. She had killed women before, but there was something about shooting a woman like Ellen Hawthorne that made her feel uncomfortable for some reason she couldn’t figure out. When you shot a woman, you shot a giver of life – maybe that made it harder because there was something unholy about that just naturally – but when you shot a good woman like this one, it was like you were sabotaging the future.

“Maybe we should just get out of here,” she whispered to no one in particular. “I’ve got a real bad feeling here. I don’t like this thing. I think it’s already gone sour somehow. I can feel it. This isn’t going to go well. It’s going to go to hell.”

A.J. and Kjawan looked at each other, a sentiment of disgust passing between them. Then, they turned to her at the same time. They couldn’t back out. If they backed out, it meant death for the three of them. Someone would come to retire them for their failure to murder their target. They would be the ones who would end up with a bullet in their haircuts.

“Are you crazy?” Kjawan asked. “We drove all the way over here – and we already agreed to do this thing. There’s nothing we can do now except do it. We just do this.”

“I have a bad feeling about this one,” she muttered, her voice rough, like a brick rubbing up against sandpaper. “Something just isn’t right. It just isn’t right. This isn’t going to go well, I know it. It’s going to fall apart. It’s all going to fall on top of us.”

“You’re just nervous,” A.J. said, smiling like a hyena surveying the savannah. “I never really saw you as a woman before, not until just right there, right now. You’ve always been so cold, calculating, ruthless, indefatigable. You’ve never given a damn about anything. Now, I’m seeing the woman in you start to come out. You’re worried, tensing up, thinking that this thing is going to be harder than it really is. It’s not. Nothing is going to go wrong.”

“Why isn’t this President of Liberia lady staying at a hotel in New York City with professional security?” Jenny asked, biting into her lower lip. “Don’t you think it’s suspicious that she gets brought out here to the middle of nowhere, to some town nobody has ever really heard much about? I mean, why is she in this cop’s house? This might be some kind of set up. They’re luring us into a trap.”

“What are you saying?” Kjawan inquired, his eyebrows raised. He had never seen her like this, so shaken, almost hysterical. “Get a hold of yourself and tell me, clearly, what you’re trying to express here. A trap? What the hell are you talking about?”

“I’m saying this could be a setup,” she replied slowly. “I wouldn’t put it past the people who hired us. Would you? With the kind of people we work for? Or, heck, it could be Hawthorne at work here. She’s a smart woman. Her kid, Alfred, isn’t stupid, either. They want to send a message to whoever is after them – ‘you come after us, we kill you.’ They could be setting up a message here to drive the point home. Our blood could be a message here. We’re like cattle being led into the killing floor.”

A.J. chuckled. He shook his head desultorily. She was losing it. Perhaps it had to do with the baby. If she kept acting up like this, he would have to retire her. He had no use for a woman controlled by her emotions on his team. If this baby transformed her into dead weight, he would have to send her to the next life. Otherwise, he’d be carrying her forever.

“Why the hell would they want to set us up?” he asked. “They don’t even know for sure that we’re coming. She wants to deliver her speech and be done with it. You’re paranoid. You’ve completely lost all connection to the real world.”

“It could be Hawthorne and Alfred, to send a message like I said: ‘You mess with *us*, we kill *you*.’ I wouldn’t put it past that steroid-pumped kid of hers to plan something like that, a slaughter to send a message. Or, hell, it could be our employers selling us out. Maybe someone trying to get back at us for some job we pulled. Heck, I don’t know. Listen, it could be that this is some guy whose family we took out. Then, to get back at us, he hires us for some phony job. We show up thinking it’s a regular old job and this guy takes us out. There could be an army in there waiting for us. Let’s just back out of this! Let’s go!”

A.J. and Kjawan shook their heads in disbelief. She had really lost it. A.J. decided right then that, after the job was completed, he would have to kill Jenny. She was no longer useful and neither he nor Kjawan could stand having a child around in case she decided to make the absurd decision to have the baby. She was as good as dead.

“There’s no one in there,” A.J. said, his voice firm now, “except a kid named Alfred, a college student in Miami for Pete’s sake, and his mother, a fragile woman, and some overweight local cop named Waikiki Joe. That’s it.”

A.J. and Kjawan laughed together. Kjawan knew now that they would have to kill Jenny. He had read A.J.’s eyes and he had immediately accepted the decision. They would have to get rid of her. There was no way out of it.

“C’mon baby,” Kjawan purred. “The most they have in there is a pistol. The three of us have more guns in this car than a Serbian warlord. You’re just nervous. Get over it. Get in gear. We have people to kill.”

“Yeah,” she replied, her mouth devoid of saliva. She wanted to cry. “I don’t want to slow the team down. I’ll get in gear. I promise. I’ll get going, I’ll get out of park. I’m...ready... to....go.”

Nika pulled into the driveway, parked, and unbuckled her safety belt. She nodded at Drex and they left the car, walking around the vehicle to the trunk. Using her key, she opened the trunk and grabbed a duffel bag. Drex smiled at her, marveling at his wife’s physical strength. He grabbed another duffel bag and slammed the trunk shut.

They walked to the front door and rang the doorbell. Nika looked around and saw two men sitting in an escalade. She tapped her husband on the shoulder and pointed towards the car. He nodded. That was a suspicious sight to say the least – two men just parked, staring out the window of a car.

“That’s probably them,” she said, her voice firm. “Those are the killers.”

“Maybe if they see that we’re here, they’ll just go away. Maybe they’ll just give up.”

“No, sweetie. They’re not just going to go away. They’re going to try to kill this poor woman and we have to kill them first. It’s up to you and me.”

Joe answered the door wearing boxer shorts. He scratched his chest and smiled. He looked like he had just gotten up. He smelled funny, too, like he’d been rolling around in kitty litter. He was unshaven and his breath stunk of alcohol. Well, the actions necessary to save Ellen Hawthorne were definitely not going to be done by Waikiki Joe.

“What are you guys doing here?” he asked, blinking his watery eyes. “We’re having some kind of party? Where are the punch bowls and chips?”

“We’re here to help protect Ellen Hawthorne,” she replied. “We’re here to help keep you safe from those guys parked across the street there.”

“You see, Joe,” Drex explained. “This is a very sensitive little situation we find ourselves in. This lady – this *President* – is a very important person and -”

“And we don’t trust you to protect her!” Nika interjected, imposing her authority. “You see, the Stamford Police Department might not be capable of handling this kind of situation. We have a badly trained, small town police force famous for botching things and we want to make sure that this thing is done right. No mistakes. The President stays safe, goes back to Africa, helps rebuild her country. That’s what’s going to happen.”

“It’s not that we don’t trust you,” Drex continued. “It’s that we want to help you. Nika and I are very involved with a lot of African causes, you see. I mean, her being from Africa

and all that. All of this just means a heck of a lot to both of us, you understand? It's imperative that this woman gets back to her country safely. You understand?"

Nika frowned and Drex decided to lower his head and stop speaking. When Nika frowned, in the context of their relationship, it was a sure signal that he had to stop moving his lips. The consequences of continuing to speak were too grave to fathom. His wife's temper tantrums were legendary in their scope and intensity.

"We're going to help make sure that she can serve her country," Nika said. "We believe in democracy, my husband and I. We believe it is our duty to help defend it. The Stamford Police – including *you*, Joe – are ill-equipped to keep this lady safe."

"Yes," Joe yawned. "I know you recycle. That makes you an authority on keeping people safe from murderous death squads. You guys read. That's lovely."

"Yes, Joe, my husband and I do recycle and read, but we do a lot more than that for our community here in Stamford and in the world. We care about people, you see. We want to help people. So, we want to help save this very important person. This woman, Ellen Hawthorne, is too important to die."

"Like 'Save the Whales' or something? Is that it?"

"Yes, Joe. That's it. Just like 'Save the Whales.' We would like to help you keep this person safe. Like 'Save Ellen Hawthorne.' Can we come in? I promise we won't be any trouble. We really won't."

She smiled politely and Joe shrugged nonchalantly. What did he care? The more the merrier. It only took him a second to conclude that the two men parked in the Escalade were just an old homosexual couple sitting in a car talking. The skinnier man was definitely too gay to be a hit man. Joe ushered his new guests into the house with the assurance of a man who knew with all his heart that he could take anything anyone could dish out at him.

"What the hell was that?" A.J. asked, pointing to the two yuppies strolling into the home, holding hands, a black wife with a white husband. "Did you see that colored girl and that pasty-faced wimp? Did you just see that? The professional couple?"

"Must be friends coming over to pay a visit," Kjawan observed. "I still don't think we have anything to be worried about. Nothing changes."

"Or something's up," Jenny said, the knot in her stomach tightening. "This might be a signal for us to call this whole thing off. We could just walk away. Like I said, we could just walk away from this one."

"Yeah right," A.J. mumbled. There was no way he was going to pull out of the most lucrative deal in his career, yuppies or no yuppies. "I'm just going to walk away from my chance to make millions. You're crazy."

"What do you think was in the duffel bags?" Kjawan wondered aloud. "Could be some gifts or something? Maybe they're bringing gifts to Hawthorne."

"Guns," Jenny replied. "They looked heavy. The duffel bags are full of guns."

She shifted in her seat and felt like she should just open the car door and run away. She was pregnant, about to bring a baby into the world for goodness's sake. She couldn't risk everything, risk the baby's life at a time like this, when she just wanted to curl up into a ball in a corner of a hotel room somewhere.

"This lady, Hawthorne," she continued, "isn't our usual victim. She's not someone who has hurt someone else. She's not some gold digger. She's a good lady doing something good for a bad country. Hell, she's just trying to help her own country. This isn't right."

"What the hell does what's right or wrong have to do with anything?" A.J. inquired. "With the amount of money they're offering us to pull off this job, she could be the most perfect person in the world. Hell, she could be pregnant for all I care. She could be the person who invented the cure to a disease killing millions of people. She could have saved Santa Claus's life. I don't care. We're here to do a job. You better shut your mouth and do it! I'm sick of you complaining and I've just about had it!"

They sat in silence, watching the house through the greasy, mud-stained glass, A.J.'s hands firmly grasping the steering wheel. He was wearing driving gloves. In any other situation, that would be something that would have made Jenny laugh. Who wore driving gloves these days? Michael Jackson had died. The eighties were too long ago to be

remembered by a good section of the population. In this context, it made sense- driving gloves would allow you shoot firearms without leaving fingerprints, to choke people without leaving skin under their fingernails as they tried to pry your hands off.

"I do think there are guns in that duffel bag, though," A.J. finally said, nodding vigorously. "The weight seemed to indicate that. I think that's the one sensible thing I've heard all day coming from that slop bucket you call a mouth. The way the bag was weighed down by something, the length of the bag. It had to be guns. They're stocking up in there."

"So we should expect more resistance than you initially anticipated," Kjawan concluded, rubbing his chin. "We're going to have a battle here. This isn't going to be just some fat cop with a crazy name, is it? We have a couple factors. One, there's Hawthorne – she's a survivor and she'll try to run, so we have to immobilize her quickly. Speed is going to be of major importance to pull this off. Two, there's Alfred, the meathead pumped up full of testosterone and he's already killed someone. We need to make sure we put a bullet in his head the split second we see him. Three, there are the two ageing yuppies with their guns."

"They looked like college professors," A.J. stated. "They probably don't even know how to shoot guns. Just some do-gooders out to try to save the world."

"I'm not saying that they're marines," Kjawan continued, "but they are the third factor. We shouldn't count them out because they will fire even if they don't know how to. Then, there's this Waikiki Joe character, who sounds like some creature from a children's sci-fi show. We don't really know anything about him. Hell, he could be one mean, murderous cat and we'd never know it because we haven't really, really looked into his life. How could we know it? I mean, the record on him reveals he's just a cop right? But he might have mob ties or maybe he's just a real angry guy with a death wish who watches too many movies. We don't know but maybe there's a reason this guy was picked, maybe there's a reason Alfred chose this particular cop. He must be crazy enough for this kind of war."

"All the more reason for us not to do the job right now," Jenny repeated. "Walk."

Kjawan sighed. He wanted to punch Jenny in the face but he wasn't a violent man – at least not at the amateur level. He only really hurt people for money. In the old days, he had hurt people for a fix. A.J., on the other hand, would punch a child in the face just to watch it bleed. He was that kind of man.

"Stop saying that," Kjawan whispered at her, trying to keep her in the game. "We have to do this job, so let's just stop talking about it and let's do it. Then, we'll go home. Trust me. We'll go home, baby. You'll be safe. You'll be safe and sound, baby."

They sat in silence. Another car pulled up into Waikiki Joe's driveway. This one contained two men. One of them was massive, built like a linebacker, while the other one was of a regular size. The massive man stretched his arms up into the air, clenching, two bowling balls of muscle placed on his shoulders.

"Jeeze louse!" A.J. shouted. "Take a look at that guy! What is this? Superbowl Sunday? Is it suddenly that time of year? What the hell are all these people doing at this guy's house? This guy makes Joe Montana look like a midget. Look at him there, stretching like some lazy water buffalo. What in God's name is going on here? Holy!"

Rey and Phillips stretched in the driveway, two pro athletes ready for the match. Phillips reached down to touch his toes, while Rey put his foot on the trunk and stretched his right calf. Then, Phillips took his right leg off the trunk and placed his left leg on it and stretched his left calf. They were prepping themselves for the struggle to come. They didn't want a muscle popping in the heat of battle.

"You ready for this, boy?" Phillips asked intensely, staring at Rey with two massive bulging eyes. His veins were popping from his neck. He was ready. "You ready to get down? You ready to bring your A-game?!! You better be. I don't want to see a B game! I don't want to see a C game. There is no such thing as a D or E game when I'm around. It's all A game. You got it? You got that, chief?!!"

"I'm ready to bring my A game, cap!" Rey replied, thumping his chest with a closed fist. "I'm ready to die for my country and to bring my A game to it. I'm ready to die for America. And I'm ready to die for the freedom. And I'm ready to die to protect the President of Liberia too. You can count on me. You can count on Ricky Rey."

Phillips nodded in approval and placed his gigantic hand on the smaller man's shoulder. He pointed an authoritative finger into Rey's chest. It was like a Greek God meeting a human to instruct him on the finer points of living, or a massive living statue addressing a passerby.

"You're a good man," Phillips said. "You're a very good man, Rey. I knew it from the first moment I saw you. You're ready for this, ready to bring that A game."

"I was in the United States Army," Rey announced to no one in particular. "I was in Gulf War I. It was a tough war but I lived through it. I even shot an Iraqi back then. My A game is right here and it's ready to go, Phillips."

"That's good," Phillips said, smiling. "That's real good. Remember, A game only."

They walked to the door and rang the doorbell. Joe opened the door with a smile. He gave Phillips a high five and then gave one to Rey. His action team was being assembled. With this crew, there was no stopping him, even if nothing was going to happen. He felt himself starting to get excited about the possibility of something really happening. Would they really have a shootout?

"How are you bad, bad men doing today?" Joe asked giddily. "You guys ready to kick some professional murderous gluteus maximus? Because you're gonna get the chance! You guys ready to do this?!"

Phillips smiled broadly and patted Joe on the shoulder. He was ready. He had been born ready. Some men love watching action from afar, like the people who watch football from the sidelines. Others, like a good scrimmage here and there. Men like Phillips like to play under the massive lights, with the pressure, with the crowd and an opposing team that means business.

"We just have a heck of a lot of weapons!" Phillips belted out, smiling. "A lot of them, Joe. I just need to know where to put them. I figure it's your house, you're the host, so I should ask you. You tell me where I need to put all my stuff."

"I appreciate that," Joe answered, touched. "I really do, my friend. You're respectful. That's very considerate of you, Phillips, and – as the host – I sincerely appreciate you having the consideration of treating me with some level of respect here. The worst thing you could ever have is a situation where someone comes over to your house thinking they own the place and you just want to tell them 'Listen buddy, this isn't your place and you need to take a couple steps back and understand who the alpha male of my little hut is, because it's me.'"

"That's so true," Rey agreed, nodding vigorously. "I hate that myself. Gosh, I hate that. That's why we're being so respectful to you here, Joe."

"Yeah," Phillips pronounced, "that's not me, Joe. I'm not that kind of guest. I'm here to be respectful so I was just wondering if you could tell me specifically where it is I should put all the weapons. Like I said, we sure have a lot of them. A lot."

"This is my house and I know everything about it intimately. What I'm going to tell you guys is that the main living room area is already full of guns from the other folks who have brought guns to this little shenanigan. You see, I already have some friends over who brought a lot of guns and I have my guns, so our guns are taking up the entire living room pretty much. We just spread them out all over the floor. If you guys can – and I'm just asking you, I'm not telling you – I'd like it if you guys could put your guns in the kitchen just because there's a lot of space there. I mean, if that would be o.k."

"Sure, sure," Phillips said. "This is your show, captain."

"Sounds good, buddy," Rey chirped. "We're here to help out."

Joe walked back inside, leaving the front door open. Rey strolled to the trunk of the car with Phillips and the two of them began to unload the vehicle. They removed several suitcases and something inside a large trash bag. The bag was heavy and Rey struggled with it as he dragged it to the house.

"What in God's name is that?" Wentworth asked pointing to a man dragging a trash bag. "What the heck is that?"

"Looks like a large trash bag," the Russian responded, shrugging. "That's what it looks like to me. What does it look like to you?"

"Yeah, but what's *inside* it? It seems pretty heavy, doesn't it?"

“How can I know? I don’t know what is inside it.”

Wentworth turned towards the Russian and placed a hand on his shoulder. He was going to have to spell it out – things were not going to go according to plan. This hit was not going to be as easy as they had hoped.

“Listen,” he whispered, “this is big. O.k.? Do you get that? This is big. These people are gearing up for war in there. Those are weapons. They are obviously bringing weapons into that house for the explicit purpose of protecting this damned Ellen Hawthorne broad. Now, you and I know what this means, don’t we? You understand, don’t you?”

The Russian shrugged his shoulders again. Wentworth sighed. The Russian was as thick as they come. He might as well have been paired with a Schnauzer or a Beagle. Actually, a border collie was probably smarter.

“Listen,” he continued, “this is going to be a serious, serious situation is what it means. This isn’t going to be some easy, let’s show up and kill her kind of a thing anymore. This is going to be a real, real bad job. I’m talking... *nuclear reactor blowing up bad*. People are going to be lying around dead, left and right, after this thing starts and...there is no going back. You better strap in if we go through this because things are going to get dicey. There is no question about this – there is a high likelihood that the two of us are going to have to go in there too. I’ve changed my mind on this whole thing pretty quickly.”

The Russian removed a pack of gum from his pocket, unwrapped a stick and stuffed it into his mouth. He smiled politely and chewed. He just didn’t care now – he had gone through the initial nervousness and settled into total passivity. Wentworth watched him – it was like watching a six-year-old.

“I’m ready,” the Russian stated flatly. “Ready, Freddy.”

“You’re *ready*?” Wentworth inquired, exasperated, throwing up his hands, his voice a squeaky hinge. “That’s all you have to say? You’re *ready*? I’m talking life and death here! There’s going to be a major thing here, a shootout here in this damned town!”

The Russian continued smiling as Wentworth gazed at him. The Russian shrugged again. What did he care? He wasn’t married, didn’t have kids. Wentworth let all his breath hiss out of his lungs. They sat, staring at the house in silence.

“Well,” Wentworth murmured, his voice a deep baritone again, “fine. If we have to do it, we’ll let’s make it a memorable Fourth of July.”

“Yes,” the Russian answered, still chewing his gum. “Good boy. Let’s kill as many people as we possibly can. Let’s make this the greatest shootout in history. Let’s leave enough dead bodies to fill the papers for weeks!”

“Did you see the guy with the damn trash bag?” A.J. asked incredulous. “Was it just me or was there some kind of tube sticking out of it? Because to me, it looked like a flame-thrower stuffed in a bag with the tube that flames come out of sticking out of the plastic bag. That’s what I saw.”

“Where would they get a flame thrower?” Jenny asked, skeptical. “Those aren’t easy to come by. They’re not sold in stores for people to just purchase.”

“I don’t know!” A.J. shouted, exasperated, waving his hands. “Where does some cop get himself a fucking flame thrower? Don’t we have any laws in this country? People can just buy any damn thing they want if they look hard enough.”

“People can buy anything,” Kjawan observed, almost lamenting the electronic age. “The damn internet let’s people buy all kinds of things. Crazy things. You can buy yourself a kidney online.”

“I guarantee you that this guy did not buy a flamethrower online and have it delivered via the U.S. Postal Service,” A.J. replied sternly. “Something weird is going on here. These people have connections of some kind. Some of these people might be hooked up into the local mob. The Chinese, Armenians, something like that.”

“How do you really know it was a flamethrower?” Jenny inquired. “It could have been anything at all. Anything.”

“It could have been a vacuum cleaner,” Kjawan postulated. “For vacuuming.”

“Maybe,” A.J. stated, calming down. “Yeah, maybe you’re right. Listen, I was in the army and to me it looked like a flamethrower but-”

“But it probably wasn’t,” Kjawan interjected, trying to calm the other man down. “In fact, I guarantee you it wasn’t a flamethrower and that these people wouldn’t even know what a flamethrower is. This is Stamford, Connecticut, some useless, nameless, invisible place filled with invisible people. These people are not mobsters.”

“That’s right,” A.J. agreed, remembering the yuppie couple. “It was probably a vacuum cleaner. I’m sure these weird local people are not showing up to the house here with bags and suitcases full of guns and flame throwers. That’s not happening. I’m sure they’re having some kind of party. I’m sure that we shouldn’t expect a bloodbath here.”

“Like a cleaning party,” Jenny suggested sarcastically. “That’s why they need the vacuum cleaner. They’re going to get together and clean the place up.”

“Like a cleaning party,” A.J. repeated, missing the sarcasm. “Yes, that’s what it must be. A cleaning party. Makes perfect sense. They’re just having a party for the President of Liberia, the first celebrity they’ve seen in their meaningless little lives. Where is the President anyhow? Where’s her son? Where’s that little piece of flotsam?”

Alfred released a steady stream of urine onto the grass as a French-seeming tourist made a loud phone call from a payphone a few feet away. The unshaven visitor shook his head with disdain, a camera hanging around his neck over a NYC t-shirt. Finally, after several moments of the traveler speaking into the phone and the static hum of the urine falling on the grass, Alfred zipped his pants and headed back to the limousine.

The driver was a thin black male wearing a suit and tie, sitting on the hood. He nodded at Alfred and opened the door for him. Then, he went around the vehicle and went in himself. He adjusted his tie. He ran a hand over his face.

“You ready to keep goin’ around suh?” the driver asked in a thick Jamaican patois. He had been up for almost twenty-four hours working to provide an education for his daughter. “More of de same, suh?”

“Yeah,” Alfred muttered. “Keep going. Keep circling.”

“We just go round and round,” the driver said, spinning back to the wheel, twisting the key. “Round and round. Like a racecar driver, suh. Like a racecar driver on the TV.”

As they circumnavigated the airport, Alfred opened the duffel bag and looked inside. They were all there, his guns, just as promised. He had landed, found the bag in the right locker, and found his Jamaican driver waiting for him. Everything had gone according to plan. Now, they were just circling the airport waiting for his mother to land and disembark. He took out a pistol and held it in his hand, feeling the weight, feeling the power to drain the life out of those who would hurt his family. He was eager to get this trap over with.

“What you goin’ to do with dat dere gun?” the Jamaican asked, his eyes frightened. “You plannin’ someting I should kno’ about?”

“I’m going to take care of business,” Alfred responded curtly. He had no time for curious immigrants even though he was an immigrant himself. “You got a problem with that? Because if you do, then I can find someone else to drive me around in circles. There’s no need for me to pay someone as much as I’m paying you! I promise you that I’m not going to be doing anything illegal. No robberies or anything like that. You don’t need to worry. Any issues?”

“No, suh,” the man responded, shaking his head, his lower lip shaking. “I don’t have no problem, no issue if ya say dat what you do is not illegal. I keep my mouth shut from dis point forward. I promise. No mo’ trouble from me, suh. I stay nice and quiet.”

“Good,” Alfred said menacingly. “Just keep circling the airport. Keep going round and round as best as you can. I know it isn’t easy but try your best not to veer off. If you do, just circle back. I promise you that there’s nothing illegal happening here. Just stay close to the airport. Don’t wander off or you’ll be sorry for it.”

“No, suh, it’s very hard but I do it. I stay near de airport. No problem, suh.”

The phone rang and Alfred reached into his coat for his cell. He threw a displeased glance at the driver and the driver rolled up the privacy divider. The man knew when to look away and this was precisely such a time. He had been assured that his fare was not going to be doing anything illegal but such assurances really meant very little when coming from armed men.

“Hello. Mother? Is that you, mama?”

“Alfie. Yes, this is your mother, your mama. I’ve landed at JFK and there’s a man here saying he’s going to be taking me to where you are.”

“Is he black, Hispanic or white?”

“Chinese, I think.”

“Good. That’s the guy. He’s a friend. He’s just driving you up to Connecticut to a police officer’s house where you’ll be safe. I’ll be there by the time you get to your destination. I’m going to be right behind you.”

“What’s happening, Alfie?”

“Just trust me, momma. I’m following in a separate car so we’ll have the element of surprise. Someone comes after you while you’re on the road, I’ll be right there and I’ll get them. They won’t know what hit them.”

“I love you, son. Maybe nothing will happen, my boy. Perhaps, General Thompson will not try anything. It could be that he has simply given up.”

“I love you too, mother – but I wouldn’t bet on that. We’re going to get hit, and we’re going to send a message. Anyone who attacks us gets sent home in a body bag, mom. The squad that’s coming after us is walking into a trap – a trap they’ll never walk out of in a million years! I love you.”

He hung up and slid the cell back into his coat pocket. Then, he reached inside the bag, finding a syringe and a small bottle. He inserted the syringe through the rubber top and drew in the solution. Then, he undid his belt and pulled his pants down. This was the real reason he couldn’t ride along with his mother. She couldn’t be allowed to see him do this.

“Alright,” he whispered to himself, “here we go. This will get me nice and ready for anything that might come my way. It’ll be just like the first time. I sent them a message then and I’ll send them a message twice as big now!”

He injected the anabolic steroids. Then, he pulled his pants back on and sat down. But that wasn’t enough. Sure, the steroids would rev him up to higher levels, especially given the high dose he had just used. The levels he had to reach to be able to kill many men would have to be levels beyond his own understanding. He would have to be at levels he had never reached before.

“I need something more,” he hissed at the privacy divider, seeing his own insane reflection glaring back at him. “Something that will help me take out these dog-hearted men, to send them home in pieces, to let them know that they should never have come after my family. I need more!”

He thought of the child soldiers in Liberia. The war lords would give them drugs to amp them up. Not performance enhancers, real drugs. He remembered the pills he had been given and the advice he had received. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out the MDMA pills and gazed at them. They would send him over the edge, rob him of fear.

“MDMA,” he said, his voice full of wonder. “Ecstasy. You plus the steroids are going to set me on fire – and I’ll set on fire anyone who thinks he can mess around with my mother’s life. I’ll be ready for war. Yes, this will make me ready.”

The privacy divider rolled down and the driver smiled a white-toothed grin. Then, the driver gave him a thumbs up for no reason. Alfred pointed to a car wash and told the driver to wait in the parking lot. The driver parked near the street so they could watch the traffic.

“We here, suh,” the driver said, turning off the car. “I guess we’re just going to sit here for a while? I should wait?”

“Yes,” Alfred answered. “Yes, you just wait.”

The driver left the car and went around to open Alfred’s door, and Alfred went out into the light carrying his duffel bag. The hit squad wouldn’t try to pull off a hit inside JFK. They would wait until she had settled in somewhere for the night. He grunted as he sat on the hood of the car and watched the cars go by. Then, he shook hands with the driver.

“Here’s a little something extra,” he said, handing the man a wad of cash.

The Jamaican counted the cash in front of him and looked up with a smile, and another thumbs up. He wasn’t sure why the man was giving him the money so soon. It didn’t seem to make any sense. They still had a trip planned.

“Thank you, suh!”

“You’re welcome. I’m giving you that now just in case I’m not around to pay you afterwards.”

The man looked shocked and went back inside his limo, happy to be as far away from this gun-toting client as possible. The money was enough to pay his daughter’s tuition for another semester. That was enough to guarantee his cooperation.

Alfred took out his cell phone and made the call. Waikiki Joe answered, voices chit-chatting in the background. It sounded like he was at a party.

“What’s up, man?” Joe inquired festively. “You guys coming or what? Your mom arrive? Everything o.k., partner?”

“Just calling to say thank you again,” Alfred sang, trying to sound friendly and optimistic. “I appreciate what you’re doing for me and my family. I sincerely do, Joe. It’s a real nice thing you’re doing for me.”

“You sound funny a little there, Alfred. Something wrong?”

“Yeah, I’m just a little hot. I feel a little strange, sweating a little bit. Nerves I guess.”

“You sound like you just spent the night in a furnace, brother. You sure you’re o.k.?”

“Yeah,” Alfred pronounced, gritting his teeth. “Yeah, I feel a little hot. A little *hot*. Just a little hot. I’m just a little nervous with this whole thing. I’m a little anxious about messing it up. I’d like to do this thing right and I’m just getting a little intimidated by the whole thing. Just... i-i-in-n-timidated.”

“Intimidated? Nothing is going to happen. How is everything go -”

“DO YOU HAVE GUNS?” Alfred interrupted in a loud voice, his hands shaking. The steroids were taking hold of him. He was feeling his heart racing, ready to pop out of his chest. “DO YOU HAVE THEM? DID YOU GET SOME?”

“Yeah, sure. It ain’t no thing but a chicken wing. It’s all going to be fine. No one is going to try anything. This is going to go according to plan.”

“YOU’RE RIGHT!”

The fact of the matter was that he knew, felt it in his guts, that a hit squad was coming, that they would try to pull the hit off fast and bloody. He knew that the hit squad had most likely been listening in on his conversations. He was sure that they knew about Waikiki Joe. They knew that’s where his mother was going to be kept. They would come for her and he, Alfred, would *kill them all*.

“Alright,” Wentworth said, “this is crazy. The house is obviously full of armed people. This is obviously a trap. It’s the most obvious trap I’ve ever seen.”

“This is the kid,” the Russian commented, his hands on the side of his head. “The kid Alfred set this thing up. It’s obvious. The kid set a trap up.”

“What the hell is going on here? Who are these people in that house? They don’t look like security personnel. Mercenaries? They don’t look like mercenaries. Yuppies and losers.”

“I have *no* idea, but maybe we wait. Maybe we don’t invade the house.”

“Wait?” Wentworth asked, turning towards his companion. “What do you mean ‘wait’? Wait for what? Both of us know we can’t wait. We can’t wait!”

“Maybe we wait for the woman to get here and then we wait some more, see if some people leave, and then we wait a little to make sure it is safe. We don’t invade the house right when she shows up. We wait.”

“No!” Wentworth shouted, his face full of horror. “We don’t wait for a damn thing! We can’t. We’re dead if the job isn’t pulled off. We’ve got a car full of killers – *professional* killers. Then, we’ve got you and me. We don’t wait for a damn thing. We take care of this and we take care of it as soon as possible. My instructions to the death squad were very, very clear. As soon as the woman gets here, they are to pounce on her and rip her to pieces, and that’s exactly what they’ll do and we’re going to go in after them and make sure this lady never breathes another breath again!”

The Russian sighed.

“You Americans,” he murmured. “You always want to accomplish things in a blunt way. You have no finesse. No style.”

“It’s how we made the greatest country in the world. Blunt courage.”

“No,” the Eastern bloc man replied, shaking his head. “No, that was Pamela Anderson and the TV show *Baywatch*. I used to watch this show and say to myself ‘I want to be America.’ But you are right in that, even if this is trap from the boy, Alfred, Ellen Hawthorne’s son, we still must go in there. We can’t refuse to do it.”

“That’s right. General Thompson will send people after us if we don’t do this thing right. Hell, it’s better to die fast today than die slowly, being tortured because we failed. So, you wanted to be an American when you were younger? Because of a 1990s TV show about a bunch of bimbo life guards like *Baywatch*? Be an American today by engaging in gun violence.”

“Yes, it was a great show. It let me know about culture. Yes, my friend, we cannot argue about this anymore. We have to go in there. Even if it is a trap, even if it is a death sentence. I have something for just such a situation where the possibility of death is very high.”

The Russian reached into his pocket and removed a small bag of powder cocaine. He placed the cocaine on the dashboard. Then, he reached into his pocket again for a dollar bill, rolling it up and placing it near the cocaine. They had to numb themselves to pull this thing off. It was obviously a trap Ellen Hawthorne’s steroid-pumped man-child had set up and it would all obviously collapse into a bloodbath.

“For when we start,” the Russian said as Wentworth gazed at him inquiringly. “Give us a little extra jolt. Get us ready to die.”

“Yeah, they use that technique with child soldiers in Africa. I’ve heard that it makes them reckless, makes them care less about living or dying.”

“And they kill a lot of people!” the Russian chuckled, smiling broadly. “A heck of a lot of people! Which is exactly what is going to happen here. A heck of a lot of people are going to die.”

The Russian began humming a tune, something Wentworth recognized but couldn’t place. The song was one he remembered from his days as a boy, back when the whole world seemed to hold infinite opportunities, before he had set himself upon this path. Now, the only way forward was to crash down, to refuse to give in, to just dive into the lava pit and hope to survive. John Lennon. The Russian was humming “Give Peace a Chance.”

Waikiki Joe sang a Beatle’s tune in the shower, scrubbing himself. He scrubbed under each armpit and then scrubbed his chest. He let the water run over his face, drowning out his tune. Then, he stood motionless while the water washed the soap off him. He felt perfectly at ease, feeling deep down that nothing was going to happen.

Turning the shower knob, he opened the shower door and reached for a towel, whistling now. He wrapped the towel around his midsection and strolled out onto the tile, letting the water fall where it felt like falling. He let life decide the course it would take, trusting in the forces of nature.

He opened the bathroom door and stepped onto the carpet, turning towards his room, opening that door and entering. He shut the bedroom door behind him and proceeded to the closet. He had to choose an appropriate outfit. Just in case – he had to look good if something did end up happening and he was called to action.

He could hear the music playing in his mind. The theme song from a Clint Eastwood or John Wayne movie. A Western. He dried his hair and realized that the first step one must take in preparing oneself is to prepare one’s hairdo. So, he walked over to his dresser and reached into the first drawer, pulling out a can of pomade. He would have to build the perfect Eiffel Tower or Leaning Tower of hair.

Walking over to the mirror, he began the sculpting process. First, he had to massage the pomade into his hair. He took a wad of the gunk and rubbed it into his hands. Then, he began massaging his scalp, pressing the pomade into the strands. Secondly, he had to shape the hair. He had let his hair grow out since the last time he had seen Alfred, since the incident involving the steroids and the dead Columbian. He had a sort of mop top mullet now, his hair longer in the back and fluffy up top.

After skillfully shaping his hair into a kind of slick pompadour, he walked into the closet and surveyed his shirts. He needed to look like a hero. Which shirt to wear on such an important occasion? He asked himself that question over and over again, running his fingertips over the collars of the different possibilities. He needed something that said Burt Reynolds or Tom Selleck – maybe even Charlie Bronson.

The red one! It had to be the red shirt!

Yes, there could only be one shirt for this particular moment, his heroic debut. The red shirt with the rhinestones. He found the shirt and slipped into it, buttoning it up. Then, he went looking for underwear in a drawer in the closet and found a pair of tighty whities. He slid into them and searched for an appropriate pair of pants. He rubbed his chin as he pondered the issue, humming a Rolling Stones tune.

He decided on his sequined skinny jeans and slipped into them. Then, he found his cowboy boots and put those on as well. He stood in front of the mirror and admired himself. Now, he looked like a true action hero. He looked like one of the guys he had grown up admiring. He began to wish that something really would happen, that this whole thing wouldn't just fizzle out into another boring day.

He sprayed on some cologne and strolled out of the bedroom to the den. He had a newfound self-confidence that was unshakeable and reverberated in the air around him. He felt unstoppable. *Let those murderers come*, he thought, *because it'll be the biggest mistake they've ever made.*

His guests all stopped talking to stare at him, their jaws open. He looked like someone who should be dancing on top of a parade float. His shirt shone in the light, and his hair possessed a sort of supernatural glow.

"What are you wearing?" Rey asked admiringly. "What is that?"

"The outfit of a warrior," Joe answered. "Of a Roman God."

"You look like a pimp," Nika observed. "You look like you should be selling women out of a cheap motel."

"Shut up," he answered. "I don't know if you guys realize what is about to happen here, but we are about to receive royalty in this house. The queen of Liberia is coming over to my humble abode and I would personally like to be ready."

"Actually, she's an elected president," Nika corrected. "She's not a queen, Joe. She doesn't have a scepter or a dominion. She's a democratically elected leader."

"That's like royalty," Joe replied. "It's just like it. As I was saying, we are about to receive royalty in this house. This royal person needs our help to stay safe. Now, she's going to be here in about fifteen minutes or so. That's the thing. We have to be ready for whatever might walk through that door when she gets here. I want her in this den, her back up against the wall. I want the rest of us positioned around this house, prepared to shoot her attackers at any moment if they do end up coming. I'm serious about doing a good job with this security thing."

"Come hell or what may, we are here," Nika announced. "We're ready, Joe."

"All for one and one for all," Drex agreed.

"That's nice. Listen," Joe continued, "it isn't often in a man or even a woman's life that he or maybe even she gets to stand out. This is one of those stand-out moments. This is our time to shine, everybody. Let's enjoy having someone who's a head of state here in our town. Let's show her what this town is all about!"

Cheers abounded, followed by clapping. Joe continued, inspired by the enthusiasm of his army. He was a general now, a leader of soldiers prepared for war. He began to believe that something really was going to happen – or maybe he began to hope something would happen. He would have an opportunity to prove himself. He would have the chance to show who he was, finally.

"Drex, my good academic friend, as loyal as a wolf and as tough as a wild zebra racing through the fields of Africa. *Nika*, his black wife, from Africa, so pretty and gentle and intelligent but at the same time as deadly as a butterfly. *Alfred*, a steroid abuser and boxer who will be here soon with his mother, Ellen Hawthorne, the President of Liberia, but they aren't here yet. *Phillips*, a fellow police officer and weight-lifting enthusiast who is excited about this opportunity to kill people, hopefully only those people who pose a threat to the rest

of us and not any innocent bystanders. Rey, who is some kind of Latino but I'm not sure what kind, maybe Mexican, Cuban or Puerto Rican, possibly Guatemalan or Ecuadorian or something like that, maybe from Argentina or Uruguay. I'm so proud to be standing up here with each of you!"

The cheers grew louder and louder. Hip-hip hooray! Hip-hip hooray! They all wanted to escape the boredom of their lives, to do something that mattered. It was a rare occasion, doing something important in a smallish town. It was like television.

"What's the strategy Joe?" Nika asked. "How do we keep President Hawthorne safe?"

"None," Joe replied. "I do not believe in strategizing."

"So, what are we supposed to do when people start shooting?" Phillips inquired.

"We shoot back," Joe answered. "We shoot back and we kill every single one of them. We let them know, loud and clear, that this community isn't the type of place you go to when you want to start a ruckus. We let them know that this is our town, and that outsiders looking to start up trouble here have to do so over our dead bodies! Let's gun up everybody!"

The living room and den were littered with weapons. Grenades, a rocket launcher, bows and arrows, pistols, revolvers and machine guns lay strewn about. The guests had certainly brought a significant amount of armament. They were truly ready for war.

Nika was wearing shades and a bullet-proof vest, holding an Uzi. Her husband, standing next to her, also wore a bulletproof vest but held two guns, one in each hand. In his pockets, were two grenades, stuffed down like tennis balls, one in each pocket.

Phillips stood behind them in the living room, near the TV. He looked like a titan surrounded by humans at the base of Mount Olympus. The AK-47 actually looked small in his large hands. Tucked into his belt was a massive machete and a pistol. He watched the whole scene with no small measure of curiosity.

"I want to do this," he whispered. "I want to kill these people. They mess with my town, with my friends and they think there's no payback, no repercussions. There's something coming from the depths of the underworld for them - oh yes, something sinister and wrong, something from the dark side of the cave, something that will crawl surreptitiously across the gates of a lonely, vile place where only those sinners who constitute the lowest order of humanity may step. Mark my words, my friends, spoken to you now in the tone of a dedicated citizen prepared to do battle to destroy that which stands in the way of the harmony of the community he serves with all his will, I shall smite my enemies with the force of a triumphant lion."

Joe stood in front of all of them, chewing gum, Rey standing next to him. He surveyed the scene like a general. Drex, Nika, Phillips muttering crazy talk, Rey and him, Joe. A united crew, ready for war. He had said he didn't believe in planning, but now he found himself planning a little. They needed to structure the space to make it harder for an invading force. Whoever was going to come to kill Hawthorne was going to have to break across a line of people firing simultaneously.

"Listen," Joe commanded, his chest puffed out. He felt like Patton. "You guys stay just like you are right now, you got it? As soon as the Queen gets here, my co-commander Rey and I will rush her into the home as fast as we can. We will move her from the vehicle and into the house very quickly, before anyone can come out of the bushes and fire at us. She will be rushed to the end of the living room, where she will be guarded. We set up a line right here near the door, like a firing squad. The hit crew comes and we all start shooting."

"I thought you said just a minute ago that we were going to keep her in the den," Drex observed. "Now, we're putting her in the living room and we're setting up a firing squad to shoot the crew coming after her."

"Den, living room. Yeah. She's going to be brought here and she's going to be placed behind all of you in the very back. That way, to get to her, whoever comes in here shooting like a maniac will have to kill Drex, Nika, Phillips, everybody to get to her. We just start shooting the second we see trouble."

"What about you and Rey?" Phillips asked. "What are you guys going to be doing?"

"Good question, Phillips. Excellent question. I will be standing right by the front door with Rey. Now, you guys have a rocket launcher there on the floor. Nika, I want you to hold

that. If someone comes in here, first thing you do is you shoot that rocket right at them before anyone can get a bullet out. Just blast them, you understand? A firing squad, like I said. That's what we are."

Nika nodded and let the Uzi hang from its strap. She picked up the rocket launcher and held it in position, ready to destroy half the house. She would show no mercy. Her job was to safeguard African children for the future of the world, and she would not sacrifice her progressive ideals for anyone. She would kill to uphold them if she had to.

President Hawthorne swirled the ice cubes in her drink while the driver smiled at her via the rear-view mirror. She didn't know his name and she didn't care. It had been a long flight with too many connections. It was difficult to get a flight to New York from Liberia. One had to jump from place to place to place until finding the right plane.

Alfred was riding in the car behind her. Her driver had pulled into a carwash near the airport and she had seen her son, tears falling down her eyes. He had seemed strange, nervous, angry, his mouth foaming a little. He had kissed her and they had barely had an opportunity to exchange words. He had pushed her off him aggressively and had gone to speak to her driver and now their two limousines were speeding towards Connecticut. It was all happening very quickly.

What was going to happen today? The thought of hugging her son Alfred kept her awake, her eyes refusing to shut despite the massive amount of pressure weighing down on them. *Alfred*. She would hug Alfred again soon and all of this would be worth it, all of this danger. Then, she would go down to New York City, to the financial center of the world, and address the United Nations in front of every representative from every nation, letting them know of the situation in Liberia. She would ask them for help and she had every reason to believe that they would grant it to her, assurances already having been given by most.

"How much longer?" she asked the driver. "How much longer until we are there?"

"Not long," the man replied. "Maybe ten minutes, ma'am."

This was not her first time in the States but it never ceased to amaze her, the immense amount of wealth and opportunity this country possessed, the paved roads and shops and cars and newspapers and security. It was like coming to a world that worked from one that was chronically dysfunctional. It was like coming from the barren desert into an oasis – not that she felt any shame in being Liberian. She loved her country.

The driver turned on the radio. Instead of Liberian sounds, she heard instead the slow, steady rhythm of rock music filtering in. The smiling Chinese driver bobbed his head up and down to the beat. She wondered whether he truly enjoyed this rough-sounding hodge-podge. That was one thing that was much better in Liberia than in the States – the music. It was over-produced in the United States, lacking any connection with a pre-existing tradition. In Liberia, it was raw, from the actual hearts of the people. Her people.

Ten minutes later, the driver pulled into the driveway of a simple enough home, large by Liberian standards but smaller than the homes of her many American friends. Just as soon as they had parked, the front door opened and a man with a red shirt with rhinestones and tight pants and cowboy boots and a carefully sculpted mop top mullet walked out the front door with a retarded-looking brown-skinned man with a jutting jaw. Both men were carrying machine guns and they ran across the yard to where the car was parked.

"Oh my God," she muttered, her hands rushing to her cheeks. "Is this the hit squad? Oh my God, they're coming to kill me! They're coming to kill me! Help! Help me! I'm going to get shot! I'm going to get shot!"

"What the hell is going on here?" the driver asked, surveying the scene like a father looking at a show at a child's birthday party. "Who are these clowns? What are they wearing?"

"The killers!" She shouted. "These must be the killers! They're here to kill me!"

The man with the shirt with the rhinestones tried to open her door and she began screaming. The man with the red shirt kept trying to say something to her but she couldn't hear him through the glass. The driver sat there, catatonic, his mouth hanging open. Her cell phone rang and she answered.

"Hello?" she squeaked nervously. "Hello? Who is this? I need help! They're trying to kill me! Oh, they're trying to kill me! Help!"

"Mom, this is Alfred," a raspy voice said, "I'm in the car behind you, pulling into the same driveway. I'm watching everything. That's Waikiki Joe, mother. The guy with the red shirt is Waikiki Joe. Just open the door and let him take you into the house."

"Oh my goodness, Alfie," she whispered. "Alfie, they're trying to *kill* me. I know it. Look at them. They look crazy! They're trying to kill me."

"No," Alfred replied. "No, mom. The guy with the red shirt and the gun is my friend, the man who's going to protect you. His name is Joe. That's Waikiki Joe, mother. You can get out of the car and let him escort you inside."

"Who's the other man with him?" she asked.

"That's his friend."

"That's really him?" she asked, looking over the frustrated man throwing his hands up into the air right outside her door. "He looks crazy, Alfred. Is that really him?"

"Yes, mom," Alfred answered. "Mom, just open up the door to the car and follow these two gentlemen into the house. Just trust me. You trust me, don't you mom? You trust your son?"

"Yes," she whispered. "Of course, I trust you, Alfred. I love you."

She hung up the phone and stared at the man with the red shirt and his retarded friend, the two of them still trying to open up the door. She crossed herself like any good Catholic would and then she opened the door to the limousine and climbed out slowly.

"H-h-hello," she stammered. "M-m-my name is President Ellen Hawthorne and - "

"No time for this greeting hogwash!" the cowboy shouted, placing his hand behind her head, pushing it down, using his rhinestone-covered body to cover her. "We have to get out of the street NOW! Otherwise, we're just shark meat out here. They're going to frigging devour all of us! The sharks are out here! Let's go! Let's go!"

"Let's go!" the other man with him shouted. "Let's go! Go! Go! Go!"

"I have to go," she said, turning to the driver. "Thank you for your help, sir."

The driver waived goodbye, his mouth still hanging open, and the two men escorted her to the front door. The man who had identified himself as Joe tried to open the door but found it locked and sighed. He giggled the handle.

"Did you lock the door?" Joe asked the other man.

"No," the man replied.

Joe knocked on the door and someone inside opened it and Hawthorne was rushed inside. Alfred had left his limousine and ran into the house with them. He had swallowed his ecstasy pill, and was starting to feel the effects.

Inside the home, were several people armed to the teeth with weapons of various makes and models. She stared at all of them unblinkingly and then she turned around to see her son. It didn't make sense. She was being guarded by yuppies and losers.

She ran to him and he hugged her in his open arms. She began to cry because she suspected that something terrible was about to happen to all of them on this day, something that would forever destroy her family. Her son had set up some kind of trap.

"What's happening?" she inquired, gazing up at Alfred's face. He looked odd, his eyes popping out, the size of tennis balls, his jaw chewing and chewing. The veins in his neck were taugth. "What's going on here, Alfred?"

"I d-d-don't know," Alfred replied. "I j-j-j-just don't know, mother. These people are here to keep you safe. Some people are coming, mother. They're c-coming t-to kill you."

The man with the mullet and the rhinestone shirt and cowboy boots stepped forward his chest puffing out. He nodded to her and directed his gaze at each person present. So this was the famous Joe, she thought. He wasn't much to look at.

"Listen, everyone," Joe said. "We have the President here with us, safe and sound. It can only be surmised that the other combatants in this crazy game will be here soon. As such, I can only say that it is our duty to protect the President with our lives. No one here walks out alive unless *she* walks out alive. Keeping her safe is our priority, gang."

There was a round of applause and Ellen Hawthorne looked about herself, scared to death of all these strangers. Her son had found people as insane as the worst assassins in

history, although they looked less like hitmen and more like suburban parents at a PTA meeting with weapons.

A.J. took the last hit and put the pipe down, storing it in the glove compartment. They had all gone through the methamphetamine and now sat hyped up, their bodies barely containing their souls. Kjawan looked as if he could barely sit in his seat. Jenny appeared to be possessed by some ghost, staring off into space. They were ready. This soulless state was the best emotional one for a killing.

"She's in there," A.J. growled, his teeth sharp. "We all saw her. She just went in there. They rushed her in there, the guy with the red shirt. They're trying to lull us in."

"Yeah!" Kjawan concurred vigorously. "She's in there! She's in there! I saw her. We're good to go with this thing."

"She's in there," Jenny agreed, her speech slight slurred. "Like A.J. said, they're ready for us. They're trying to lull us in and open fire. They'll be shooting as soon as we get our feet through the front door."

"She's in there," A.J. repeated. "Now, it is our job to make sure that she doesn't ever leave this place. She's going to get buried in there today. This day – today – is Ellen Hawthorne's last day on planet Earth. Hero or no hero, inspiring woman or bum living on Skid Row, it doesn't matter. A job is a job. We do this job and we're all set for a new life in Africa, the sort of life each of us has dreamed about for a long, long time. This is a fresh start. This is the first day of our lives as part of the world's elite."

"To a fresh start," Kjawan said lifting up his handgun. "To a new life and a better hand! No more hiding my money, laundering it like some fool, losing most of what I make. We take this business to the next level."

"To a fresh start," A.J. repeated. "To a better life! We just go in there and we start blasting! No plans. Like I said – you can't plan because it means you care, and when you care, you'll just end up failing."

"To a fresh start," Jenny said. "Fresh. Start."

The three of them touched pistols and climbed out of the car. They strolled across the street, approaching the small house. A.J. led the pack. The plan was relatively simple – there was no plan. The plan was to improvise a plan, to see what would happen. They all knew they would face gunfire upon entering the home, but they also knew that they were better shots, that they killed for a living and that these people were suburban idiots.

They crossed the front yard and stood in front of the door, their weapons in hand. Kjawan had a Gatling gun strapped to his back as well as several grenades. She had the pistol in her hand as well as an elephant gun and bags of bullets. They were all wearing body armor. A.J. was the least well-armed but the determined look in his face let her know the truth – he was the most dangerous one of all of them. He was the coldest, most talented killer she had ever known.

Phillips looked at the trash bag and decided to discard his machine gun. He gazed over at Nika, holding the rocket launcher and his resolution grew stronger. He needed something better. The flame thrower was a deadly weapon, spewing out a massive torch that would burn anything in sight. He crouched down and opened the bag.

"What the hell is that?" Drex inquired, turning around. "A vacuum?"

"It's a flamethrower," Phillips replied, lifting the machine.

"Nice," Drex said, smiling and bobbing his head up and down. "Very nice."

"Just don't point that thing at me," Nika said. "I'm already black enough."

He placed his arms into the straps and pulled it on like a backpack. Then, he took the tube and held it in his hands. It really felt like a vacuum cleaner or a leaf blower. It didn't feel that heavy. It was conveniently portable.

Waikiki Joe was standing by the door, armed. Upon seeing Phillips standing there, the flamethrower ready to fire, Joe gave an enthusiastic thumbs up. That was the kind of sight he needed to see on a day like this one – the sight of a soldier, ready for the battle.

"Nice," Joe said. "Very nice. Perfect. We're ready, now. Let's rock!"

Ellen Hawthorne had been placed in the very back of the room, pressed up against the brick wall. She stood there, shivering. Phillips turned to her and gave her a military salute, just to let her know that she was in safe hands. He was ready to die for her, ready to show what men of his caliber were capable of accomplishing.

"I just want to let you know that I really appreciate everything you've done for women's rights," Nika said, the heavy rocket launcher firm in her surprisingly strong arms. "We're big supporters of women's rights, my husband and I."

"Yeah," Drex added. "My wife and I are big, big supporters of the local Liberian community here in Stamford. We actually have a little community here, which surprises people because we're such a smallish city but we do and we really try to make them feel at home here. My wife and I go to all the luncheons."

"T-t-thank you," Ellen Hawthorne muttered. "I guess."

"You're welcome," Drex replied, smiling genuinely. "You're very welcome."

"Yes," his wife added, "you're definitely welcome here, Madam President. Actually, I have to say thank *you* for everything you've done for women. You're just amazing. I'm a big fan of yours. My husband and I believe in you."

Waikiki Joe coughed and all attention turned to him. He approached the door and looked through the peephole. Then, he turned his attention to his audience, his face contorted by resolve. All eyes were on him. He was their leader, their Eisenhower.

"Looks like we have company!" he shouted. "Everybody in position. This is going to get started right now. Let's go! Let's go! This is not a drill! This is not a drill!"

Then, he paused and surveyed every face in the room before adding: "Alright everybody, its go time! Let's do this thing! Let's kill some bad guys! Yippie!"

Wentworth looked at the Russian and grabbed the dollar bill, rolling it up. The Russian had made six lines and Wentworth took the first, second and third. Then, he passed the rolled-up bill to the Russian and the Russian did the rest. They were both wired by the time they had finished.

"It's go time," Wentworth said, grabbing a pistol. "Let's do this thing!"

"It's go time," the Russian repeated, lifting up an Uzi.

They opened the doors and walked out. Just ahead of them, he could see the three assassins he had hired. They were right outside the door of the home, like vipers coiled. He recognized one of them and watched as the man backed up a few feet, obviously preparing himself to bust the door in.

"He's going to kick in the door," the Russian whispered. "We're doing this now."

"We wait a little bit out here," Wentworth whispered back. "We clean up after."

They were crouching on the edge of the lawn. It was an amazing thing that the crew didn't see the two of them but they were so focused on the task at hand that they couldn't muster up the lack of focus to look back. The Russian and Wentworth just crouched in silence.

"We wait crouching here?" the Russian asked. "My legs hurt."

"Yes," Wentworth hissed. "We just crouch down out here and we wait. We don't do a damned thing until we need to. We wait until the shooting dies down and we see if we need to go in there to clean up the mess."

"Like a clean-up crew," the Russian remarked. "Yes. Let's be maids."

"Exactly," Wentworth said. "We're the clean-up crew."

"Maybe there won't be anything to clean up."

"I'm hoping that's the case. I'm hoping that we just sit out here and everything takes care of itself. There's no reason for the two of us to get involved if the real crew does the job well. We only get involved if there's an unforeseeable type of situation."

"Unfortunately, the unforeseeable tends to be foreseeable."

"It's foreseeable that this thing is going to end badly."

Up ahead of them, A.J. raced towards the front door of the home and leaped forward, his leg outstretched like a martial arts actor in a Taiwanese film. Wentworth and the Russian cringed as they heard him shout. The door had flown off its hinges.

It had begun.

"This is it," the Russian breathed out.

"This is it," Wentworth agreed, trembling. "Let's just hope for the best, hope this thing works itself out. It isn't going to, though. This is not going to go well. Life is not good. Life sucks... and then you get a grenade shoved into your bum by an African warlord. Jeeze, life sucks. Life really, really is no good."

Life was pretty good. Chief of Police Sang was humming to himself in the spa, his Presidential neck being massaged by a young woman wearing a kimono. He felt satisfied. He had reached the highest position he wanted to reach in life. He had no dreams of rising up in the state hierarchy, really. Sometimes, he did, but most of the time, he was just happy to be the Chief. It was good to be the Chief.

It wasn't a bad town, really, Stamford. People raised families and died here like anyplace else. Sure, it was a little boring. What mid-size town wasn't? This wasn't Boston or Los Angeles. It wasn't New York City. It was a town somewhere in between Bumbleweed, Whereelse, and Imlost. It was just an all-American town, and he loved it.

His cell phone rang. He chose to ignore it and let it ring. They could bother him some other day. He was on vacation for Pete's sake. He grabbed the girl's hand and directed it to his lower back. He had a knot there that he needed addressed.

"This is where the pain is, sweetie," he instructed. "Down here in my lower back. It hurts really bad, so go easy, but dig in there. Get that bump out. It's a tight spot."

"You're not going to answer your phone?" she asked him, sounding ditsy.

"Are you my wife?" he retorted. "Or my supervisor?"

"No," she answered meekly. "I'm not your wife."

"Then, just do the massage and don't worry about it. Go to the lower back. That's where it hurts. Sometimes it hurts so bad I don't even know what to do with myself. So, focus on that and help me get this tight spot to relax."

The phone kept ringing and ringing. Ring! Riiiiiiiiing! He gazed at it with disdain. He should have shut it off. It was lying there right in front of him. Here he was getting massaged on a table and he brought his phone into the room with him and put it right there on the table with him, right by his head. Of course, it had to ring right in the middle of the session. That was inevitable.

"What?" he snapped, finally answering the phone. "What do you want? I'm on vacation and I'm in the middle of a massage, here."

"This is the Station," a nervous voice said. "We have an emergency, sir."

"Yeah, so? Cat up in a tree? Send someone out there."

"Well, sir, it's just that we have sort of an unusual situation here. There's a report of a bunch of people standing out on a lawn in front of Joe's house with a heck of a lot of weapons and we figured we should call you sir to let you know. It just seems very suspicious, sir. Very unusual."

"Joe? Who is Joe? There are a million Joes out there."

"You know sir...Joe. *The Joe*."

"No, I don't know, you vague fool. There are a lot of people in the world named Joe. There's Joe Namath. There's Joe Montana. Joe DiMaggio. There are a million Joes."

"Joe, sir. They call him *Waikiki Joe*."

Sang's eyes grew wide and he stood up, pushing the masseuse's hands away. He motioned for her to leave the room and she nodded and closed the door behind her. Then, he ran a hand through his hair. This was serious business if that idiot was involved.

"Joe?" he asked. "*The Joe*?"

"Yes, sir."

"Armed guys outside his home?"

"Yep."

"Jeeze Louise. We're going to have a bloodbath. That moron has been watching Clint Eastwood movies for way too long. He'll start firing before they even open the door. Get all the guys you can get to go out there to that man-child's house. Send as many police units as necessary. That idiot probably got himself into some kind of trouble and there's going to be a war unless we step in and do something!"

“Yes, sir. That’s why I thought I should contact you, sir.”

Sang hung up and saw his clothes lying on a chair in the corner. The massage room in the Korean parlor was decorated with several Asian-themed posters of flowers and temples with script underneath each image. Sang grabbed his clothes and climbed into them.

After he had finished dressing, he gazed at himself in the full-length mirror behind the chair and admired himself. There he was, beautiful and Presidential, wearing a brown t-shirt and kaki shorts with socks and sandals.

“Let’s handle this,” he said to himself, trying to convince himself that everything was going to be o.k. “Like a professional. We can’t let that dolt Joe ruin this whole thing for us. He’s too stupid and liable to create a bad situation here.”

“You going already?” the young woman asked. She had opened up the door and reentered the room noiselessly. “I didn’t have time to finish my massage.”

“Yes, sweetie. I have to go take care of some business. Some serious business.”

“But you didn’t get your usual happy ending,” she observed. “You never leave without that. You always wait.”

“I know, baby. I know. No tip for you today.”

He kissed her forehead and walked out of the room and out of the parlor. He found his Saturn and climbed inside, turning on the engine and speeding away, listening to jazz oldies while twisting and turning through traffic. His phone rang again.

“The men are on their way, sir!” the same voice from the Station announced.

“Good. I’ll meet them there. How many men were you able to get out there?”

“Twenty-seven, sir.”

“Good. Get more! Get as many as you can.”

He hung up the phone and opened the glove box. It was still in there. His baby. His Magnum .357. He kissed the barrel and smiled. He was ready. No one was going to rock his boat, get him fired.

“Today, somebody’s gonna get hurt,” he hissed angrily. “That buffoon Waikiki Joe thinks he can start up trouble in my town. He’s wrong. Dead wrong. That nincompoop!”

In the ensuing time since the incident with Alfred the previous year, Sang had learned a lot about Waikiki Joe. The man had a reputation as a cool guy, but his record revealed a different picture. He was one of the most volatile officers on the force, kicked out of his high school in Hawaii for beating up a football coach for no reason, cited multiple times for excessive force. As he entered dunderhead Joe’s neighborhood, he could hear the sounds of war. Bullets were interrupting the flow of the soft New England air. It had already begun. He was too late.

7. The Shootout

It is unclear now as to who actually began shooting those first bullets, but, along with a sort of mass hysteria that sprang up with the first shot, the first waves of a sea of lead came from somewhere in that room. There was the sound of splintering wood as the front door was broken and then the vision of three ominous figures entering the residence – and then the bullets began to fly about at unimaginable speed. At first, there were a few bullets zipping in the air, coming from some unknown source, and then there were metallic bumblebees zigzagging about in a swarm.

A.J. deftly jumped onto the floor, his pistol firmly grasped in a steady hand. From the floor, he began shooting at the sea of faces, his reflexes honed to compact minutes of reasoning into milliseconds. BLAM, BLAM, BLAM. He thought he hit someone but he wasn’t sure, so he just kept shooting, squeezing the trigger over and over again.

Everyone seemed to be firing at the same time. Jenny was lying on the floor next to him, shooting as well. Kjawan was standing, firing his Gattling gun. A steady stream of shells flew through the air and landed on the carpet behind him. Holes were springing up on all the walls of the residence.

“Kjawan!” Jenny shouted, watching her lover burn. “Nooooo! Baby, you’re hurt! Stop! Drop and roll! Drop and roll, Kjawan!”

But Kjawan could hear nothing but his beating murderer’s heart being consumed. He squeezed and held the trigger down, the bullets flying. They were all firing at him. He was hit by thirty-something bullets, his body showing little sign of giving up as he bled and burned.

BLAM! BLAM! BLAM!

Bullet after bullet struck at the burning man but he persisted, holding down the trigger, firing his Gattling gun. Streams of bullets filled the room but he seemed unable to hit anyone, until there was a shout from Nika Drex. The spray had claimed a victim. Someone had been hit. The least dangerous of the people in that house.

“My husband!” she began shouting. “My husband! He shot my husband! Drex!”

Before he could slay a single foe, Dr. Drex had been struck by a series of bullets while laying low on the carpet. Seven or eight bullets. Nika could not tell. The bullets kept flying and flying. The room was smoky and everyone seemed to be lying flat on the ground. It was almost religious, really – smoke everywhere but a single burning flame visible amidst the night. It was like the burning bush appearing to Moses in the desert.

“My husband!” she kept repeating “My husband! He shot my husband!”

“Drex!” Joe shouted, suddenly aware of the situation. “Not you! Drex!”

Phillips decided to brave the danger, so he stood up as the bullets flew left and right, up and down. He aimed at the burning man with the Gattling gun and he released another stream of flame. Although the man was already burning, this stream pushed the man back against what was left of the front wall. The man, pushed back, kept shooting.

Nika Drex took the opportunity to wipe the tears from her eyes and push a button on the rocket launcher, setting another missile in place. She stood up and fired again, sending another rocket flying through the smoke as she muttered out a “Go to hell!”

WOOOOOOOOOSH!

This rocket hit the burning man and went through him, sending blood and other human debris spraying everywhere. Where there had once been a living, breathing man named Kjawan, Jenny’s lover and perhaps the father of her soon-to-be-arriving child, there was nothing but a set of charred boots with two stumps firmly planted into them.

But the missile had not stopped there. It had gone *through* the man and into the remainder of the front wall, and more bits of brick and cement rained down in the smoky room. It was almost like snow for a second, everything moving slowly as the flakes danced gently down to the carpet.

“Kjawan,” Jenny whispered, her eyes filled with tears. “Baby! My baby!”

Before she could repeat his name, part of the roof of the home caved in. The ceiling fell down upon them, the tiles and wood and insulation covering their bodies. There was darkness and silence for the briefest of moments. But this respite was not to be.

Having left the piles of wood and brick, having crawled out, the voice of Nika Drex could be heard shouting over and over again: “You killed by husband! You killed my husband! Go to hell! You go to Hell!” A.J. had not lost consciousness, nor had he suffered too severe a shock.

He stood up while Jenny remained buried. He used all his muscle to throw the fallen beams off his back and jumped up from the remains of the front of the house onto the burned, blood-stained carpet. He strained his eyes to make heads or tails of what he was seeing.

Waikiki Joe and the black woman were kneeling over the body of the pale man he had shot. She was crying and Joe was crying, holding her head to his chest. No one seemed to see him but the massive beast of a man with his flamethrower. He was a minotaur, that man. A creature from another universe.

The beast-man squinted, his eyes impacted by the explosions and bursts of flames. The man’s vision was blurry, the flamethrower wavering in his hands. The man tried to point and shoot but A.J. was faster. He was angry now, but still enjoying every moment of the battle. He lived for this.

BLAM!

Another single shot. One deadly shot and the beast-man collapsed, the bullet landing in his thick-skulled forehead. Phillips fell back, landing on the carpet, his eyes open now, not squinting – but there was nothing to see. He did not move.

Waikiki Joe made a grab for his gun but A.J. pointed his pistol at his head and growled at him, screaming: “If you try it, you’re dead!” The black woman froze too, unable to understand what was happening. They were losing now. They had lost three good men but they were going to lose the war.

“You too,” A.J. said, covering both of them with his pistol. “I’ll shoot the first one that moves. You understand me? Now, I don’t know what in the hell is happening here. Bullets are flying everywhere, this house is falling apart. You’re just a cop. Just a stupid, lazy, small town cop. Why couldn’t you just be a normal cop? Just do what they all do. Get yourself a donut. Take the easy way out. Why’d you have to get involved with all of this? Do you understand what you’ve just done? You should’ve just been a normal cop. You’ve signed your own death warrant.”

Joe stared him down, dead in the eyes. He didn’t feel like a hero anymore, not like he had felt that morning. His hair was no longer sculpted. The strands stuck to his sweaty forehead, and his shirt was now covered with the blood of other men. His cowboy boots were crimson and his lower lip trembled.

“I-I-I g-g-guess I’m n-n-not just a r-r-regular cop,” he stuttered.

“I-I-I g-g-guess I’m n-n-not just a r-r-regular cop,” A.J. mimicked mockingly. “Do you ever stop to listen to yourself? You sound like an idiot trying to be some kind of movie hero. Do you think you’re John Wayne? Charles Bronson? You’re just a fat cop from Stamford, Connecticut. You’re the worst kind of loser that there is. You’re *nothing*. Do you understand me? And you’re going to die – both of you are going to die – if you don’t tell me where Ellen Hawthorne is right now!”

Nika Drex spat at him and Joe looked down at the ground, ashamed of his fear. Nika was not ashamed or scared, and she would not give up Hawthorne. No, she would go down with the ship. Little acts of decency, even in the face of death, determine the character of a man or a woman – and Nika was a good woman.

“We’ll never tell you!” Nika shouted. “Never! Do you hear me? NEVER!”

“Tell me where she is right now!” A.J. screamed, his eyes red and orange. “Or I’ll shoot you right now! The game is over! No more games! You’re going to die!”

Waikiki Joe began to cry. As the tears streamed down his face, he realized that he was no hero, just a man trying to survive. He was a regular fellow, a man afraid to die. He looked at Nika and whispered to her: “Sorry, baby, but I’m way too young to die here today.” Then, he extended his arm and pointed towards the couch in the living room.

The couch had been turned away from the wall to face the front of the house. It was filled with holes, the stuffing spilling onto the seats. In fact, holes seemed to find themselves now on almost all of the walls of the house. Bullets had hit virtually every surface. The countertops were riddled with bullets, the cabinets mere splintered wood.

“She’s hiding behind that couch,” Joe said. “You’ll find her there.”

Nika Drex slapped the cop in the face and spit on his chest. She was thoroughly disgusted with this weak sample of a man. She would have died for Ellen Hawthorne. She would have died for what she believed in. Men are weak. Men are cowards. Women are harder. Much, much harder.

“Are we going in there?” the Russian asked incredulously. “There’s no way I’m going into this thing. Did you see that? Did you see? It’s a war zone!”

“See what?” Wentworth inquired, shrugging his shoulders. “I didn’t see much. It was all too hazy from the bullets and the shouting and all that. Let’s go in!”

“The rocket launcher!” the Russian exclaimed, exasperated. “That was a rocket launcher! I’m sure of it! It was a rocket launcher, I tell you! I know the sound. Someone in there actually has a rocket launcher!”

“The whole front of the house collapsed,” Wentworth observed in a daze. “We don’t know what’s going because we can’t see much.”

"The house is being destroyed," the Russian said. "They have all types of weapons in there. Who knows what the heck else is going on here? Did you see all those bullets? I heard a Gattling gun. Then, I heard a missile launcher. The front of the house collapses. Holy!"

"I'm pretty sure I heard a flamethrower," Wentworth added, rubbing his chin.

"Yes!" the Russian vigorously agreed. "I think I heard a flamethrower, and I'm pretty sure I saw one of our guys burning alive, shooting the Gattling gun while burning to death!"

"I think I saw that too," Wentworth said, nodding, his face devoid of all blood.

"Can you believe it?" the Russian repeated several times.

Then, they heard the sound of sirens. Yes, the sound landed into their ears, the distinct, shrill scream of several police vehicles coming their way. Wentworth looked at the Russian blankly while the other awaited his command. There was no sense in a sure death. It was better to run away.

"Well?" the Russian finally said. "Do we go in there?"

"Are you crazy?" Wentworth replied. "It's like a warzone in there! Now, the police are here. The best thing for us to do is get the heck out of here!"

"But if we don't take her out," the Russian said, "then, what? We die. If we don't take care of this contract, they kill us just as sure as if we die here today."

Wentworth considered the Russian's words. They were true. There was no question that the people they worked for would hunt them down and end their lives if the assassination of Ellen Hawthorne did not occur as planned. Sure, they might be able to escape for a couple of months, maybe even a year or two. But one day, while sitting on the beach somewhere, or, heck, just sitting at home on the computer in some dingy apartment in Bombay, they would wake up and find a knife at their throats. Then, it would all end with their blood running down their t-shirts as they squirmed.

"You're right," Wentworth concluded, "but it looks to me like my guy has it under control right now, doesn't it seem that way to you? We might be o.k. after all."

Wentworth lifted a shaky finger and pointed it into the former front of the house. He could see A.J. standing, undaunted, his pistol in his hand. He was there, alive, amidst the rubble. He seemed to be in control now. Perhaps it would all work itself out.

"If I go to that couch," A.J. hissed, "and she's not there, you don't even want to know what's going to happen to you. I will rip out your intestines, boy, and roll them up and fry them and eat them in front of you as you die. I will kill you. Do not toy with me. I'm serious."

"I know," Joe murmured, defeated. "I know you can kill me and that it wouldn't mean much to you. Looks like I bit off more than I could chew with this whole thing. What can I say? I made a mistake. Not the first one I ever made either. Probably the bloodiest one, but not the first. I lost some friends. My house has been destroyed. There's blood everywhere in this place. This is a pretty horrible situation – but it is a situation I created with my own bull. Now, I'm standing here just trying to stay alive, and I'm telling you something you need to know, something that matters to you."

"What are you telling me?"

"The truth. The damned truth. Check it out for yourself. She's behind that couch. Trust me, I know I'm just a small-town cop, not some kind of hero. I've looked in the mirror and this killing thing, this violence thing – it just isn't for me. She's over there."

A.J. smiled and announced in a cruel voice: "Then, if I have her, what the heck do I need *you* for? Not for much. Like you said, your life is pretty worthless to me, isn't it? You fat idiot!"

BLAM! BLAM!

Two shots interrupted their discussion, landing in Waikiki Joe's chest. Joe gasped and gasped for air. Nika stood over him, trying to comfort him despite his betrayal. He was going to die and these were his last moments on earth. She would try to make them decent. Even if he was just another man. Even if he was just a coward.

"You'll be okay," she whispered, looking into his eyes and lying. "It doesn't look that bad. You'll live through this. You'll be o.k., Joe."

"He shot me," Joe bumbled, "I can't believe it. He actually shot me. I'm dying, aren't I? Am I dying, Nika? Am I dying?"

"Just try to stay awake," she sang, caressing his forehead.

But it was too late. Joe's eyes closed and she started shaking him but she could not awake him. He was limp in her arms. He had died right there in front of her, just like her husband. They had been shot by a madman without qualms about killing.

"Damn you!" she shouted. "You go to hell! You freak! You didn't have to kill him!"

A.J. chuckled and pointed his gun at the woman. He smiled, licked his lips, and blew her a kiss. He truly was a freak and he truly enjoyed killing. She stood there, her dead husband at her feet, her hands raised into the air. She was too proud to beg for her life. She would die with her eyes open, staring with dignity at her tormentor, at the murdering dog who would take her life and that of an innocent woman trying to change her country for the better.

"You're a germ," she said calmly. "That's who you'll forever be regardless of who you kill. You'll always just be some germ, some little piece of flotsam who floats around, unable to have human feelings, unable to be one of *us*. So you kill people like *us*. Is that gun supposed to scare me? I don't fear you. No, I pity you. You're just a sad excuse for a life."

He laughed and lifted his gun, preparing to fire, to shut her up, but a bullet came from nowhere and struck his neck. BLAM! He used a hand to cover the wound but the blood would not stop spilling. It covered the entire front of his shirt and he collapsed to the ground, his eyes searching. Had the shot come from the Heavens, an act of God interrupting his massacre? He had been shot. Had an angel shot him?

No, it wasn't an angel. It had been Jenny, springing up out of the rubble. She had killed him. She was standing tall now, her pistol still spewing smoke from the recently fired shot. She stepped away from the fallen beams, towards him. She pointed the gun at his head, and she fired a second time.

BLAM!

She was a strong woman and the recoil did not make her step back. One shell plopped onto the carpet and a body lay motionless on the carpet. Nika Drex used the opportunity to pick up her gun and point it at Jenny. Jenny did not drop her gun. She pointed hers at Nika.

"Who the hell are you?" Nika asked, unafraid. "Why did you just help us? Why did you just save us? Why?"

"Us?" Jenny asked, her eyes wavering nervously. "Looks like it's just me and you here, darling. Everyone else seems to be gone."

"You know what I mean!"

"No, I don't think I do. What's your name?"

"Nika. Nika Drex. That's my husband."

She pointed at a dead man lying on the ground. He seemed at peace. He had been a good man during his life and he would be remembered as such by her and all of his family. She thought about the fact that they had been trying for a child. That child would never come now. No, she would spend the rest of her days thinking about him, unable to love anyone else. There was no other man for her.

"I'm sorry to hear that, Nika."

"And you? What's your name?" Nika inquired firmly.

"I'm someone you know," Jenny replied.

"Someone I know? I doubt that."

"Not really, actually. We don't really know each other. Any ties I had with anyone else in the world went away a long time ago. I don't even really talk to people anymore, even at gas stations or coffee shops. I mean, not really. Not with any emotion in my speech. You remember the guy with the Gatling gun who was burned alive?"

"The murderer who shot my husband?" Nika asked.

"Yes," Jenny replied quietly. "Yes, he was a killer. He was also the closest thing I had to family, maybe the father of my baby. I don't really have anybody else."

She paused and wiped tears from her eyes before resuming. Kjawan had not been a good man. He had been a man who had suffered from the same disease of a lack of humanity that she suffered from. He could not be good, but, for a man who could not be a man like other men, a man incapable of feeling, he had been as good as he could have been.

"I'm pregnant," she said, her voice quivering. "I'm about to have a baby. I'm about to bring a new life into this world. I'm bringing a son or daughter to this existence."

"Is that why you helped me?" Nika asked, her gaze unwavering.

"I-I g-guess," Jenny stammered. "I don't know. I'm so confused. I don't know what's up or down, right or wrong. I don't even know who I am anymore. Just kill me. I'd rather die now than live the rest of my life in jail, wishing I was dead. Please kill me. Don't hand me over to the cops. Kill me!"

Cops! The Russian turned to Wentworth and pointed at flashing lights coming down the street and the two men ran to the car. The cops were here! Wentworth unlocked the doors and they climbed inside like rats fleeing from a sinking ship. Wentworth turned on the vehicle and drove away from the scene in one movement.

"What are we going to do?" the Russian asked as they raced down the suburban streets. "They will kill us! They will kill us! We have to go back there and kill the woman! We can't just leave. We can't."

"We ain't done yet, sweet pea," Wentworth said, throwing the Russian a nervous glance. "We are from done, here. These folks will know the meaning of the word revenge by the time this day is through, you understand me? Oh, we're coming after this Hawthorne lady. She's not going anywhere."

The Russian nodded. Wentworth was right. They wouldn't be able to kill the woman from behind bars. They would have to escape from the police and then circle back to finish the work, to do the clean-up. They would have to retreat for an hour or so, think about it, and then execute a new plan of some kind.

"What the hell?" Wentworth murmured to no one in particular. Then, Wentworth rolled down the windows on both the front passenger and driver's side windows. He looked out, gazing at something just ahead of them on the street.

They came to a stop at a police car horizontally parked, blocking passage through the street. The car's lights were blinking red and blue and two officers stood with guns drawn in front of the vehicle. One of the officers was holding a megaphone.

"Get out of the car!" the officer's amplified voice shouted. "Get out of the car with your hands up! Hands up!"

Wentworth nodded at the Russian and they opened their doors simultaneously while the two officers stood ready with guns drawn and pointed at them. As Wentworth and the Russian exited the car, they kept their guns low. They needed to act in concert, to time it all perfectly.

"Now!" Wentworth shouted. "Do it!"

Both men placed their guns through the open windows, using the doors as a shield and began firing at the officers as the officers fired back. They had to kill these men, move their car or plow through it, and get to safety. They had to get out of there before they ended up in a cell, staring at brick walls.

Blam! Blam! Blam! Blam!

The officers each fired two shots that slammed into the doors. Wentworth and the Russian returned fire with four shots each, and the officers lay dead, bleeding on the concrete. The two assassins wasted no time. They were as cool as a frozen pond, as collected as veteran soldiers. There was no dallying about.

The Russian raced to the police vehicle and jumped into the driver seat, putting the car in reverse and backing up into a driveway. A suburban man with neat haircut and board shorts was exiting the house, coming to the lawn, shouting over and over "What the hell? What the hell?" his hands on his temples. He had witnessed the shooting.

The Russian jumped out of the police vehicle and the man ran back into his home squealing. The former Soviet Bloc enforcer ran back to Wentworth and entered the Escalade and the two men sped away. They made a few more turns and found the highway, jumping onto a ramp. They sped up the ramp, swerving.

"My God," the Russian whispered. "We just killed two cops."

"Trust me," Wentworth said, his voice tremulous, "these murders will be the least of our problems today. We have to get this woman before the day is through and we're going to

have to kill a lot of cops to do it! By the time this day is done, this fine city will have its streets washed by the blood of its police force. We're not through, not by a longshot."

As the police pulled into the lawn, Nika eyed Jenny, covered in debris. She knew this young woman from *somewhere*. Her voice sounded familiar. Her face seemed like a blurry reflection in a pool of water. She reached into her archives and searched file after file until she came to the right one.

"Jenny," she finally said, the agitation from the gunfight fading away. She had lost her husband and all of this did not seem real. It was like she was floating in a stream.

"Yes," she whispered. "It's me. It's Jenny. You treated me."

"W-what are you d-doing here? Do you work with these people?"

"I used to, doctor. I started working with them after I dropped out. You remember me back then? The shyest, craziest girl on campus. I wanted to kill myself every second of every day. Now look at me. I'm a completely different person. It's like I died and was reborn."

"You're a murderer!" Nika shouted. "You're insane!"

Four S.W.A.T. team officers decked in black armor and helmets entered the rubble, stepping over bricks and shells, smoke still lingering amidst bullet holes and pools of blood. Ellen Hawthorne had been hiding behind the couch and she now walked towards her son, Alfred. Where had Alfred been during the entire shootout? What had happened to him?

Immediately after the first shot had been fired, Alfred had collapsed into a corner, victim of a heart attack induced by a mixture of steroids and narcotics. He had remained there, convulsing, unnoticed, during the entire battle. He continued shaking as his mother hovered over him. She ran her hands down his cheeks, caressing them lovingly.

The S.W.A.T. men went through the house - what was left of it - securing the premises, going from room to room carefully with their machine guns. One of the men motioned for another twenty-four men to approach. The men had been standing on the lawn and they ran towards the house to join their fellow cops. Some of them took up positions on the lawn, close to the house, while more of them went inside and stood around.

"My son!" Ellen Hawthorne shouted. "My son is dying! Look at him! He's dying! Please! Please help! Help me! Help!"

"What's happening to him? Is he having a heart attack or something?" One of the S.W.A.T. team members inquired stupidly, chewing gum. "Has he been shot? Is he bleeding? What's happening?"

She shook her head to indicate that she didn't know. They searched his body for bullet holes but found none. How could they know that the deadly mixture of drugs and testosterone pumped into Alfred's system was having a deleterious effect? He was convulsing right there in front of them.

The S.W.A.T. member stood up and used a radio to call the paramedics, part of a mass of men and women standing on the far edge of the lawn or on the street. Two men responded quickly, racing towards the collapsed home with a stretcher, lifting Alfred up onto it, and then lifting the stretcher.

"We'll keep him safe," one of the paramedics said, winking at President Hawthorne. "Don't worry about it, ma'am. You're safe now and so is he."

She covered her face with her hands and fell apart, sobbing uncontrollably. Nika, who had lost her husband, seemed to come out of her paralyzing daze because she too broke down into a crying fit, a thousand tears falling from her eyes. Jenny watched and caressed her stomach. Had the child been harmed when the front of the house had collapsed on top of her? Would she still be able to be a mother?

"I'm sorry," she sang, stroking her belly. "I'm so sorry. This is the worst thing I could do to a child. A child shouldn't see these kinds of things. I'm soooooorry, baby."

Sang stood out on the lawn, chewing tobacco dripping down his chin. He spat and he spat. He scratched his neck and arms. He gazed up at the sky and then down at his shoes. He swore at himself over and over again. He walked around in circles.

"Damn it! Damn it! Damn it! Damn it!"

What a mess! What a damn mess! How could he have let this happen in *his* town? Things like that didn't happen in his town! Now, from the looks of it, there was a collapsed house riddled with bullets and packed to the brim with dead bodies. It occurred to Sang that he could lose his job over something like this – a member of his force involved in some sort of bloodbath. They would transport the bodies to the hospital on the off chance that some of them might survive. Procedure dictated that only the hospital could declare someone dead in the City of Stamford. No one was officially dead yet.

Just then, one of the S.W.A.T. team members approached him and informed him that they had found survivors but that Waikiki Joe most likely numbered among the dead. Sang nodded and waved the man away. He began walking back and forth, back and forth again and again like a rooster pacing around his hens.

Two other officers had been killed. He had just been told that by one of his men. Two of his men had been killed by people escaping the perimeter he had set up in the area. Now, Joe was dead. Cop victims and unknown victims. Collapsed house. A neighborhood detonated. It was like something from a nightmare. Everything had fallen apart in a day.

"We have some survivors," an officer approaching him announced. "Including some women. One says her name is Nika Drex and that she's a college professor and that her husband was killed in the crossfire. The other says her name is Jenny but refuses to give us her last name. The last one is hysterical, her son was killed, but she says her name is Ellen Hawthorne and that she's the President of Liberia."

"Ellen Hawthorne!" Sang shouted at no one in particular. "President of Liberia! Are you kidding me? Are you frigging kidding me?"

"No sir," the man replied, his hand rubbing down a thick mustache worriedly. "Says that's her name – Ellen Hawthorne, President of Liberia. Says she's supposed to give some big speech over at the UN."

"Jeepers!" Sang sang nervously. "Jeepers creepers! Damn! This is bad. This is bad."

"Yeah," the officer agreed, "it's a real bad one, this situation. Should we take them out to the station, read them their Mirandas, question them and all of that? I mean, that seems like the best thing to do here, sir."

Sang nodded vigorously and the officer walked up to the house. Sang pushed on his temples with his palms and stared at the flashing lights of a police cruiser in a dream. Soon, three women were being escorted down the lawn by eight armed officers. They were taken to a police van and locked inside.

Sang felt his phone vibrate and he pulled it out of his pocket and put it up to his right ear. A husky voice spoke to him from the other end. It sounded like a man with a bad cold. Sang listened carefully. It could be the top brass, calling to fire him. Were they that fast?

"Is this Chief of Police Sang?"

"Yes," he said hesitatingly.

"I'm with the Times. We've just heard about this devastating, earth-shattering situation with President Hawthorne and we're wondering whether she's going to be able to make it to her speech later today."

"M-m-meeting?" Sang mumbled.

"Yes, sir. Her speech at the UN today. She's going on at 7:00 p.m. She's expected to denounce a faction in her country and request aid from the international community. You are aware that she is a possible candidate for the Nobel Peace Prize?"

"Of course I am!" Sang snapped nervously. "I know all about this situation. I know about this whole thing. From top to bottom. How the whole darn thing works! I know all about it! The President will be there. She will make it to all her commitments. The United States does not bow down to terrorism!"

"Terrorism?"

"Anything!" Sang screamed into the phone. "The United States doesn't bow down to anyone or anything! Neither does my police department!"

Sang hung up and looked around. No one seemed to be standing on the lawn anymore. Men were carrying the bodies on stretchers, taking them to an ambulance, to carry them to the hospital where they would most likely be declared dead. Sang sighed and walked away from the scene, heading to his car. He needed to forget this whole thing for a few minutes.

Otherwise, he was likely to try to kill himself. He was too old for this type of thing. The press would have a field day with this.

The reporter was wearing a suit coat that did not match his pants. He threw a smile at the camera, brushing his hair back with a large hand and winked at the audience. Then, he adjusted his orange tie. He was wearing a blue shirt.

“Skip Witherby here with today’s news here in Wrestling Town, USA, Stamford, Connecticut. Looks like we had quite a storm come through this city, folks. A real doozy. Dead bodies. All over the place. It’s crazy! It’s amazing.”

The woman sitting next to him looked the other anchor up and down, analyzing his blue suit and perfectly manicured nails and trimmed eyebrows. Her head looked like a blond golden retriever tail glued to a polished white dome with two sparkling blue marbles. She never blinked.

“Yes, Skip,” she pronounced, nodding, “this is a heck of a dramatic turn of events isn’t it? Very dramatic. I’ve never seen something so dramatic.”

“Yes, it is. It certainly is, Barb. Folks, we bring it here for you first. Right here on KYWO News, your source for sexy Stamford news. The hottest news, the raciest stories, the most unique tales – right here on your station, KYPX News Stamford. Ladies, Gentleman, it would be difficult for me to overstate the gravity of this situation. There is a lot of gravity to this situation!”

“Lots of victims here, Skip. Lots of victims. This is very dramatic.”

“Yes. Yes, Barb. Loads of victims. A *shooting* took place leaving several people dead or wounded in a suburban neighborhood here in Stamford. We have unconfirmed reports of a rocket launcher being used, as well as flamethrowers. Yes, folks, flamethrowers.”

“Flamethrowers! Oh my!”

“Yes, Barb. I’m afraid so. It’s really sad, isn’t it? The state of society these days. It’s the drugs, Barb. I’m telling you, it’s the drugs. The drugs are corrupting our youth and forcing them to get flamethrowers out and burn people alive.”

“I bet it is, Skip – or it could be that awful music kids are listening to these days. There are so many artists who fail to really care for our children’s mental health by spewing out the worst garbage imaginable. It’s awful.”

“Probably a combination of both, drugs and music. We can’t be sure. Maybe video games as well. What we can say is that the President of Liberia, Ellen Hawthorne was the intended victim. Secret sources within the police department have confirmed that what appears to have happened here was an attempt at a *hit*, members of an elite assassination squad apparently getting wacked themselves!”

“They got wacked, Skip.”

“They did indeed, Barb. They did, indeed. Wacked.”

“Do we know anything about the identity of the hit men, Skip?”

“No, Barb, but our sources suggest a *woman* – yes, folks, you heard it right and you heard it here first on KYWO, your source for Sexy Stamford news, a woman! – was arrested in connection with the assassination attempt on the President.”

“Wasn’t she supposed to address the entire UN, Skip?”

“Yes, Barb. No word on whether that UN address is going to happen later tonight. If the address happens, it will be a historic occasion indeed in that it will represent the first time a female African head of state addresses that body after an assassination attempt in Stamford. That has never happened before in the history of the UN.”

“A historic first, Skip! A historic first!”

“To all our viewers out there – keep it sexy with KYWO, your source for sexy Stamford news. Thanks and keep it steamy, everybody.”

It had all gone to hell. The Russian turned the television off and stared at the ceiling, focusing on the cracks behind the twirling blades of the ceiling fan. Why was the ceiling fan on anyway? It wasn’t even hot. Nothing seemed to make sense anymore. The day had become a surrealist painting. Flamethrowers. Rocket launchers.

The Russian had seen plenty of blood over the years. He had labored as a KGB agent before the fall and then he had gone into black market operations, fulfilling the consumerist desires of a populace desirous of American jeans and cologne. Then, he had gone into women. His favorite trade. Women.

Ah, he thought at that moment, *how nice life would have been if I had just stuck with women*. Eastern Europe had always been a focal point for the sex trade, women shipped off to the Arab world to please men hungry for a different sort of beauty. After the fall of the Soviets, the Eastern European sex trade went global. Suddenly, he wasn't just providing a girl to a lonely soldier, he was shipping Polish and Russian women – alongside other Eastern Europeans – to every corner of the globe. Everyone seemed to want a nice Slavic girl.

He had it all. Money from strip clubs, prostitution schemes all over Western Europe and the United States, mail-order bride sales. Cars. Houses. Obviously, he had all the women he could have wanted. But he had gotten restless. The KGB in him wouldn't just let him sit. He had to get out there and see the world. He had to experience danger. So, all of a sudden, Boris Chagaev disappeared and started from the beginning, arranging assassinations – for no reason at all other than a desire to try something new.

Hundreds. He had killed many, many men and women directly and indirectly. Some of the operations had been well-organized affairs. Others, messy. Not once, however, had he been part of an operation as badly executed as this one. Things had really gone south.

"Amateurs," he mumbled to himself in Russian. "The Americans are damn amateurs. They don't know how to act like professionals. Damn Americans..."

"What was that?" Wentworth asked, turning around. He had been staring at the mirror, contemplating himself. "What did you say now?"

"Amateurs," the Russian repeated in English. "You Americans are amateurs. Your people are useless amateurs who don't know how to handle something like this for the life of you. Damn American fools! Idiot!"

"Oh you fuck off!" Wentworth shouted, his anger springing forth. "If you think this mess is *my* fault then you got something coming! I couldn't have known that there was going to be a bloodbath in the middle of a suburb, in Stamford, Connecticut. How could I have known that? It's obvious that the hit squad just marched in there without any kind of a plan."

"*You* should have planned this better," the Russian stated flatly. "*You* should have taken a more active role. It's your fault."

"Like you're just the silent partner," Wentworth retorted. "This thing is as much your mess as it is mine. Don't you fool yourself. You are responsible."

It was a small hotel room with two beds and filthy, yellow walls. The room stank of cigarettes and sex. Various stains adorned the carpet and the sheets. As the two men stood in silence, the Russian surveyed the room disapprovingly. He hadn't been in a room that disgusting in a long, long time. He was used to class.

Wentworth sighed and walked away, into the bathroom. The Russian heard him crying and he whispered to himself in his native tongue: "Wentworth, Wentworth, Wentworth. You messed this whole thing up really, really badly. When this thing is over and we take care of this lady, I'm going to kill you. I'm going to suck your blood out like a vampire."

Wentworth stopped crying and used his palms to dry his eyes. He walked to the sink and began to wash his hands. The soft hum of the water going down the drain made him feel calm for some reason. He placed some liquid soap on his hands and massaged his palms. Then, he rinsed and cupped some water. He rubbed the water over his eyelids and smoothed his hair down with two wet hands.

"Wentworth," he hissed at himself, "when this thing is over, you are going to have to slit this slimy Russian's throat from ear to ear. Yes, I think I'd like that. Just to see the look on his face. I'd like to watch his dirty blood pour out and make a pool on the ground. I'd love that. I really would."

He dried his hands and walked back out to the room. The Russian was still sitting on the edge of one of the beds in the exact same position, his back hunched. Wentworth placed his hands on his hips and licked his lips before starting. Before they could kill each other, they would have to work together.

“Look,” he finally said, looking into the Russian’s eyes, “we still have our guns, right? We have enough ammo and firearms to take out a small army. This thing isn’t quite over yet. It’s not over by a longshot. Now, we can’t snipe her. We have to make sure we get her – if she gets hit and survives, she becomes a martyr. That’s the last thing our employer’s want. We have to make sure she dies. We have to shoot her up close.”

“How can we get her when she’s in the police station surrounded by cops?” the Russian asked, exasperated. “We’re just going to show up at a police station? That sounds as stupid as your hit squad’s plan. Just charge forward?”

Wentworth smiled. It was more like a wolf showing his teeth to let another wolf know he meant business. This wolf had himself a plan. He wasn’t a mad dog like those people in that damned hit squad. The lobo cared for his own life and he knew how to survive, and how to kill to do it. They would be smart this time.

8. Aftermath

Sang grimaced, his face the very essence of pain. He didn’t feel any hate or even any ill will towards the killers. He felt disappointment in his own town, in the idea that some local yokels actually thought they could protect a head of state. Disappointment in himself because he hadn’t seen this coming. Hadn’t Joe called him at home before talking crazy stuff about protecting this President Hawthorne? Hadn’t Sang just nodded and smiled and half-listened? Now, this whole mess was sitting on his lap and Joe was most likely dead.

“Why’d you do it?” he asked, his voice a hoarse exhalation. “You brought a storm upon this community. You wrecked our peace. Why? Why did you do this?”

“It’s just what I do,” the young woman answered. “It is who I happen to be. I’ve always been like this.”

She was pretty, sitting there handcuffed in that prisoner’s garb. Her clothes had been taken from her for inspection by lab analysts. She sat there, coy, almost as if she had reached a sort of peace with herself. She wasn’t agitated, disturbed. She accepted her fate, the fact that she would spend the remainder of her life behind bars.

“You kill people? All the time? That’s what you do?”

“Yes,” she replied. “That is what I do. I kill people. All the time.”

“What’s your name?”

“Jenny. Jenny Sanford.”

“Well, Jenny...can you tell me why it is that I have two dead officers? Why a house in the suburbs has virtually been destroyed, having been transformed into ruins? Why you shot at these people like a marauder? Why you shot at one of your own people in the head, someone from your own team of killers? Why? WHY?!!!”

He slammed his fist down on the desk, his face red. She should have been startled by that, but she wasn’t. She just shrugged and smiled. She felt no emotions. He had dealt with psychopaths before but he had never grown accustomed to them. How can one grow accustomed to a person with the emotional depth of a tennis racket?

“Because someone paid me to do it,” she said. “Someone paid our team. We were paid to kill Ellen Hawthorne. So, that’s what I did.”

“Who paid you? Can you tell me that?”

“I don’t know. The guy who arranged it is probably dead. That was A.J., former military. The other guy is named Kjawan. That’s all I know.”

“Actually, you’re wrong on both counts, Jenny. Seems like you know even less than you think you know. I’m not the only ignorant one in the room, sweetie.”

He shoved two files towards her and opened them. She leaned forward and gazed at the photos. She came alive for a second, her calm interrupted. It was like a ship getting hit by a high wave, knocked against the sea, and bouncing back. She regained her composure. He continued, making the most of the opportunity to melt the ice.

“A.J.’s name was Robert Dawson. You’re right, he was Special Forces. He also killed his own father, a preacher who used to get cute with him sometimes, take advantage of him. They say there’s a strong correlation between abuse and psychopathy. What do you think?”

“I wouldn’t know,” she mumbled. “I’m perfectly fine.”

“I think you would know, actually,” he retorted, searching her face. “I think you know a great deal about abuse. I think you know a lot about what it’s like to be mistreated, judging from your file. You know a lot about that, Jenny.”

She gazed down at the edge of the table, avoiding his eyes. She seemed to be trembling now, imperceptibly. She looked like a boiling tea kettle, shaking slightly as the steam began to pump out of the nozzle. She was ready to pop.

“How about this Kjawan?” he asked, pointing to a file. “Did you know his real name was Juan Montez and that he was from the Dominican Republic? Did he even have a Spanish accent or had he lost it so he could disappear, assume a new identity? Did you know that he was a suspect in a murder six years ago, under investigation for slitting an old woman’s throat in New York City to purchase drugs? Did you know that he was arrested a couple of years after that for pickpocketing and that he and a group of men were suspected of raping and killing a fellow inmate in lockup?”

Her lips began to tremble and she struggled to contain herself, to keep the tears from spilling out of her eyes. It had all seemed glamorous in the beginning, like Bonnie and Clyde, like Robin Hood without the inconvenience of giving to anyone. Now, it seemed like a nightmare and the faces of the dead flashed before her eyes. She had never known them. She had never known the two men who could have fathered her child.

Sang cleared his throat. He had saved the best for last, like any good interrogator. It would be the killing blow. She would collapse, break down, and he would use her implosion to extract the information he needed.

“Did you know that during that prison incident, he contracted these diseases?”

He pushed the hospital records towards her and she read the blood work sheet. She looked up in surprise, her hand immediately rushing to her stomach. Had she infected her own child? Did she have the disease too? They had made love so many times, sometimes with protection, others times without it. She most likely was infected herself.

“Oh God,” she whispered. “I’ve killed – I-I-I...”

Then, she fell apart. She began to scream and kick, knocking the chair over, falling on her back. The tears raced down her face and landed on the austere white floor of the interrogation room. It would be a while before she could speak. Sang would wait patiently and then he would find out everything.

Nika Drex, sitting silently in the holding cell, exhausted, looked over at Ellen Hawthorne. Somehow the incident had brought them closer – at least in her mind. Reality had shifted. Or perhaps the incident had somehow tainted the heroic image she had had of this woman. For now, *President* Ellen Hawthorne was no longer *President* anything. She was just plain old Ellen Hawthorne. Nothing more, nothing less. A woman hurting, a victim.

“Is it worth it?” she asked silently. “Standing up for something? Representing something when it requires so much giving, so much loss?”

“No,” Ellen Hawthorne replied mutely. “It isn’t.”

“No good will come out of this?”

“Nothing that will repair the pain. Nothing that will make it all worthwhile.”

She looked away. Then, they heard shouts and the sound of glass shattering. Then, a brief silence followed by what sounded like a backpack being thrown down at a wood floor. No, that wasn’t right. It was more like the sound of meat being tossed at a wall, or the sound of a massive, one-ton box crushing a dog.

A guard ran by their cell shouting: “Jesus! Jesus! She jumped!” Then, another one raced by a few minutes later. Then, yet another, this one screaming: “Oh my God! Oh my God!” The two women in the cell, each sitting on a separate bed, facing each other, could not see anything but the fog of their pain. Something had happened, that much they could absorb, but the bizarre events of the day had distorted their ability to reason.

"I'm going to complete my address," Ellen Hawthorne finally said to herself. "I'm going to perform the address and I'm going to ask the UN to help me take care of these sons of bitches. I want to hunt them, to kill them slowly, one by one."

That statement Nika Drex seemed to hear just fine. She came to and realized where she was and what she had to do. She began nodding vigorously. She closed her fists. Their loss had no purpose that could justify such pain but their anger had a direction.

"We find these animals and we kill them," she said, her eyes alive. "We rip them to shreds and we scatter their bones across a grass field."

"We kill them all," Ellen Hawthorne agreed. "We torture them, kill them, make them an example to anyone who would do such a thing, who would kill such a good man as my Alfred, my little Alfred, my beautiful boy."

"As God is my witness, I swear to you that I will not stop, that I will murder every man responsible for the death of my husband. I will rip them to shreds. He was gentle, a good man. A good, good man. A man I loved when I could love no other."

Without even knowing it, the women had just forged a pact. It was a pact based on anger. It was a pact based on an agreement to shed blood, to raise Hell. They would sell their own souls to the devil accomplish their task. Nothing would stop them from delivering their enemy to the inferno. Their enemies would be sent to the darkness, to the fire.

This was truly Hell. Sang stood there frozen amidst the fire and brimstone, the sulfur and the tortured souls. The window of the interrogation room had been shattered. He saw it all again, just the way it had happened. The woman had fallen onto the ground, worked herself loose, slipping the handcuffs right off – as if she'd had military training to do it! – and then she had leaped out the window. She had broken through the window.

She had landed on the grass outside and had started running towards the road right out the window, a few steps from the police station. But she hadn't stopped at the sight of the truck. No, she had jumped at it. She had leaped forward and the driver had not had enough time to react. She had been struck down and the many wheels of the semi had passed over her. He did not know what she looked like now. He didn't want to see. He refused to look.

"Who the hell put a damn window in the interrogation room?" he asked, pointing at the shattered glass. It was all he could say. He turned towards a deputy who had run in after he had heard the screams, but the deputy stood frozen as well.

"It was always there, sir," the deputy responded, coming out of his comatose state. "Sir, we haven't ever had anything like this happen. No one has ever tried to jump out of that window. No one has even run to the road. This...this has never happened before."

"She killed herself," Sang said, unable to believe it.

"I'll be damned, sir. I think she did."

Sang ignored the deputy and walked over to the window. He kicked out a few remaining shards of glass and went outside. He walked on the grass and came to the road. The truck was stopped about fifty feet away, the blinkers flashing. An old man with a long beard standing outside the truck approached him as soon as he saw him.

The woman had been crushed and all that had been left behind were flat piles of crushed flesh stretched across the blacktop. The trucker hobbled his way over to the scene and stared at the remains in disbelief. It was like melted plastic dribbled onto the black.

"Why?" he finally blurted out. "Why did she jump like that?"

Sang turned to him and placed a hand on the man's shoulder. Five officers were coming around the police station to investigate, approaching the scene. They walked cautiously, their hands ready to make a grab for their weapons.

"What happened here, sir?" one of them asked once they had reached him.

"Suicide," Sang replied.

"Suicide?"

"She jumped out the window, ran to the road here and jumped in front of the truck. This poor man standing over here had the misfortune to be driving the truck."

"Oh man," the officer muttered despondently. "I've never even heard about something like this happening before. I've never..."

“Get some guys out here to close the road off. Then, take some pictures. Don’t move anything until I tell you to. I want good pictures, nice and professional. We have to document everything here. A mess like this doesn’t just blow through a town without people losing their jobs. Someone is going to find himself in the unemployment line.”

“No problem, sir. I’ll do everything by the book. Top quality pictures. I’ll write the report as well. Everything will be official, spic and span. No way it’ll blow back to hurt us.”

“Good,” Sang said. “I’ll write my own. We’ll compare them before we turn them in.”

Sang turned and walked back to the window of the interrogation room, intending to go through the window and climb back into the station. He only made it a few feet when he heard the officer’s voice calling to him.

“Hey sir!”

Sang turned around.

“Helluva a day, huh, sir?”

“Yeah,” Sang replied. “Helluva a goddamn day.”

He could think of nothing else to say.

The two women were sitting quietly, staring at each other, when he found them. He snapped his finger at the boy holding the keys, a rookie just fresh out of the academy, and the rookie came alive. The young man approached the jail cell and used his key to open the door. The women did not look up.

“What the hell is going on here?” Sang asked, standing in between the two women as the boy closed the door behind him. “I’ve never seen anything like this. It’s like I’m living in some kind of nightmare.”

The women did not say anything. They both looked at him, their eyes red and filled to the brim with the liquid of torture. They had suffered too much to listen to anyone.

“What the hell is going on here?” Sang asked again, shaking his head. When they provided no reply, he continued. “I’m going to assume that this has something to do with a political issue of some sort. Some damned African issue, some foreign policy thing coming to our shores. I’ve lost officers here. I just watched a young woman jump out of a window and kill herself. A woman literally committed suicide before my eyes today.”

“Jenny?” Nika inquired.

Sang seemed surprised.

“You know her?”

“I used to treat her.”

“What the hell do you mean you treated her?”

“She is a former patient. I treated her for depression.”

Sang raised eyebrows and rubbed his chin pensively. Perhaps that was it. Just a simple case of madness. A madwoman who had wanted to kill off her psychologist. He had heard of such cases before. Perhaps this whole thing wasn’t even political – that would make it easier for him to escape any blame because psychos were less avoidable than thoughtful, sentient murderers.

“No,” Nika said, anticipating his thoughts, “my relationship with her had nothing to do with what happened. Absolutely nothing. I assure you.”

Sang shook his head in disbelief. It was too big of a coincidence. The woman is treated by a doctor. The woman shows up and kills people in a house where the doctor just happens to be with her husband. It was looking more and more personal.

“It’s true,” Ellen Hawthorne pronounced. “This was about me. I have many enemies in my world and these enemies took my son and for that they will soon feel the pain my vengeance will impose upon them. They will suffer until they wish that their mothers had never given birth to them upon the soil of my land.”

“They’re dead,” Nika agreed solemnly. “The men – and I know that they are men for only men can have such a callous disregard for life – who killed my beautiful Drex are dead. My husband was a *good* man.”

Sang rubbed his temples. He sighed and gazed at one woman and then the other. They were crazy. In fact, everyone seemed to have gone insane. The assassins, the victims, the head of state. Everyone was losing it.

"So," he said, "there is nothing you have to tell me about what is going on here? What was the motive? Who did this? What were their names aside from Jenny Sanford?"

"You know as much as we do," Ellen Hawthorne said. "The man who did this was the leader of the rebel army seeking to reinstate a dictatorship in Liberia, a lizard by the name of Abel Thompson. General Abel Thompson. As for the assassins, I do not know them."

"You?" Sang asked Nika. "Can you tell me anything?"

"Aside from Jenny," she answered, "I know not a one of the assassins. As far as I know, they are all dead, and the most important thing is that we get President Hawthorne here to New York City so she can address a council of very important people."

"New York City?" Sang almost shouted in disbelief. "You expect me to just let you waltz out of here after what just happened? This is going to take a while before I sort this out. I could give less of a shit about your Constitutional rights right now. As far as I know, you two gals are the victims of this thing and I'm very sorry for your loss, but I'll be damned if I let either of you leave here until I get some answers. I'm allowed to hold you for 72 hours before you have to go up before a judge for a hearing if I charge you with a crime. I'm damned closed to holding you without charging you just for the hell of it. I'm holding both of you under investigative detention until I damn well feel like it."

With that said, he turned and walked out. He didn't care about the law on this one. The ACLU could sue and say what they wanted to say. The law might say that it is illegal to simply put someone in a cell. He didn't care. He would hold these victims until he could get his thoughts together, calm himself down, bring everything back to a state of normalcy.

"We have to get out of here," Nika said to no one in particular.

"We need a distraction to do that," Ellen Hawthorn replied, "and we don't have any way to distract anyone from in here. We need something...a miracle... or a disaster..."

The distraction Ellen Hawthorne and Nika needed was coming. Outside of the police station where the women were being held, there was a small sandwich shop owned by a Lebanese couple. The couple, fat, tanned and hairy, sat behind the cash register, watching as the Russian and Wentworth ate falafels. A white sauce accumulated on the chin of the American counterpart of the Eastern European hard man.

"The guns are ready to go," the Russian said. "They are in the car waiting for us. You and I are here, outside of the police station, our bloods boiling. What are we waiting for? Why don't we just do this now and get it over with?"

"This would be the perfect time," Wentworth said. "I'm just trying to get my nerve up, Ivan. This isn't exactly the type of situation I'm used to."

"My name is not *Ivan*," the Russian stressed. "Listen, the cops are outside, cleaning up some sort of mess. This is a perfect coincidence. It works in our favor. They are cleaning up the remains of some poor fool run over by a truck is what it looks like to me. Most of the officers are outside. It buys us time."

"This would be the perfect time to strike," Wentworth said, his hands shaking. "Just give me a *damned second*. Let me get my nerve up."

Wentworth released a current of shaky breath and bit into his falafel. He closed his eyes and let the flavor enter his system. He focused on the task at hand, trying to calm himself. He assured himself that it was all going to work out in the end, that they would be successful. Then, he realized that he was not at all sure that that was true.

He dropped the falafel onto the plate and nodded at the Russian. The Russian smiled back at him and they walked out of the restaurant. They went to the Escalade and entered. The Russian found the two bulletproof vests where he had left them, under his seat. He handed one to Wentworth and put one on himself, tightening the straps.

"These should help keep us safe," the Russian observed as Wentworth tightened the straps on his own vest.

"Let's hope so," Wentworth retorted bitterly.

The Russian reached to the backseat and found the firearms there in a bag. He opened the bag and handed Wentworth his share while he prepared himself with his own. Then, he closed his eyes and whispered the Lord's prayer. Wentworth had never prayed himself but he

closed his eyes and listened. What did God even mean in a world full of carnage? Nothing. Nothing at all.

Back when Sang had been born, the world didn't have these types of atrocities. People didn't jump out of windows and run into trucks. Assassins didn't come to America and start shooting people. People used to be decent. Now, they were barbarians. The whole world was filled with barbarians.

"I've never seen anything like this," he said, staring at Nika and Hawthorne, sitting there, handcuffed in front of him in his office. They stared back at him blankly. "I brought the two of you here, to my office, to discuss some things."

"What things?" Nika asked.

"Big things," he replied. "*Real* big things. You see, I called the FBI, the CIA, and just about every number I could think of. Just about everybody hung up on me. Isn't that something? I've got the head of state of a country getting shot at and no one cares. Not one agency seems interested in any of this."

"Doesn't surprise me," Hawthorne interjected. "It's Liberia."

"Well, it sure as hell surprises me," Sang responded. "Never have I heard of something like *this*. Hell, it's like something out of the dang movies. A shootout with missiles that causes a house to collapse. Dead people everywhere - "

Nika and Hawthorne winced simultaneously.

"I'm sorry about that," Sang said, continuing, "I know you two lost yourselves some loved ones and I appreciate that. I seriously do. I can understand. I've lost some folks in my time as well. I empathize."

The silence between them lasted several seconds as Sang searched their faces. Resolute faces with firm lips. Not pouty, mourning faces. No, these women were planning something. They were going to try to escape.

"You guys are up to something," he said, squinting.

When they didn't respond, he continued. He would keep them handcuffed inside the cells, just to make sure they didn't try anything.

"You guys are up to something," he repeated. "I know it. I can see that look. That look...well, there's a name for a look like that. It's called the look of *revenge*."

He gazed at them inquiringly again but saw no reaction. They weren't going to admit it but they were going to try to break out and he wasn't going to have it. Victims or not, he was holding them as long as he damned well pleased.

"Revenge," he said, proceeding, "good old revenge. Now, some cold-hearted folks might like it served cold, but not you two. No. Folks like you like it nice and hot. So hot in fact, that the heat could burn this whole world down, poor little Stamford, Connecticut, and all those people out there in their houses in this little town wouldn't have a place to live. But you won't stop after burning down this city. Hell no. Never. Not a chance. You won't stop until everybody's dead."

He paused again but they sat staring at him with the same resolute look. He threw up his hands and sighed. He didn't know what he was doing, why he was wasting his time with victims. He had lost it.

"Well," he said, "you two don't talk much, do you?"

"Don't have anything to say," Nika whispered in reply.

"Me neither," Hawthorne responded in the same whisper.

Sang stood up and started pacing back and forth behind his desk. He thought about getting someone to beat the truth out of them. They had to know something about this entire ordeal. Something more than what they were letting on. Why had the young woman jumped out of the window? Where were the rest of the assassins?

"Listen," he pronounced carefully, "I want the two of you to listen to me very carefully. I know what's going on here. I know it all very well. The two of you think you can exact some vengeance, Wild West style. Well, it isn't happening. Nope. Not here. The two of you want your revenge, you do it in your own town. Enough people have died in my city.

Dead bodies all around us. Dead people falling out of trees and popping up out of the ground. Hell, it was a bloodbath back in that house and I lost some good officers. It all ends now. So, put these little dreams of going to New York to make some speech out of your mind because it's not happening. No way, no how. You're not leaving this station."

He waited for a response but still nothing came. He hit his temples with his palms. He would keep them in the station forever. These two women would grow old and die in that station. Even after he died, if they survived him, they would still be in there.

"What are you trying to do to me?" he lamented.

"We are going to do what we have to do," Hawthorne answered.

"What do you have to do?" he inquired.

She didn't answer and he growled angrily. Then, the telephone rang. He looked at it in fear, feeling that something just wasn't right. He let the phone ring, staring at it blankly. Something else was happening. The day wasn't over yet.

"You're not going to get that?" Nika asked him.

"No," he replied. "Not yet. I'm not going to get it."

The phone rang and rang. Finally, he picked up the receiver. He prepped himself, expecting the receiver to blow up in his hands. It wouldn't have been the strangest thing to happen that day.

"Hello?"

"Is this Chief of Police Sang?"

"Yes. Who is this?"

"Package delivery, sir. Need you to sign for it. We're right outside the station."

"Jesus. This is a bad time. Come back some other day."

"It'll just take a second, sir."

"You can't come into the police station? Who's the package from?"

"I don't have an answer to that question. It's anonymous. Seems to be some sort of football gear? Maybe some memorabilia? Looks like some NFL mugs or something."

"NFL mugs? Damn it. I didn't order those."

Sang looked up at the two women and sighed. Then, he felt a sudden rush of fear overtake him. What if these women suddenly got the urge to jump out of the window and run into traffic? He looked up at the officer standing by the door and the man seemed to read his thoughts because he nodded at Sang, as if to say *don't worry about it sir, nothing is going to happen this time*. Sang directed his gaze back at the two young women.

"Now, I have to step out for a minute," he pronounced slowly, "and I don't want anything to happen. Do you guys understand me?"

The two women stared at him blankly.

"There was a woman who died earlier today," he continued. "She just died. That young woman who was here with you, Jenny. She's dead now. I don't want to see the same thing happen to you. You get it?"

Still no reply. Sang stood up and slipped on his suit coat and checked to make sure his gun was in its holster. He tightened his tie, refusing to take his gaze off the women. When he finally looked away from them, he directed his eyes back to the officer standing guard.

"Do...not...let...them...out...of...your...sight."

The officer nodded nervously. Sang considered staying behind but eventually walked to the door and proceeded to the front door of the station. NFL mugs? Could it be the Patriots gear he had ordered weeks ago? Those were commemorative plates. Not *mugs*.

"What do we do when he shows up?" the Russian asked.

"We nab him," Wentworth replied.

"Nab?"

"Take."

"We just take him?" the Russian yelled, incredulous. "I thought the plan was just to go in shooting, to shoot the place up. I thought it was going to be a head-on assault."

"No," Wentworth answered. "That was never the plan. I'm not that crazy."

"What do we do after we take him?"

“We use him as a hostage. We have to be quick. We have to snatch him right away. After we get him, we move fast. We put a gun up to his head and we tell him to bring Hawthorne out here.”

“What if he doesn’t?”

“Then, my Eastern friend, we kill him, and we go in there and kill everyone who gets in our way. We shoot the place up. I’m hoping we can do it smoother than that. I’m hoping this Sang clown values his own life enough to understand that we can resolve this thing with a lot less bloodshed if he hands over Hawthorne.”

“Is that him?”

The Russian was pointing to the glass doors. Wentworth nodded. It was Sang, humming as he walked out the doors to the pathway leading into the station.

“How come there are two of you out here?” Sang asked, running his gaze suspiciously over the two men. One of them – a foreign-looking fellow – seemed nervous, his eyes darting from side to side. The other man, he had an eerie smile and a homosexual way about him.

“Oh, you know,” the effeminate one replied, “we’re just trying to get as many hours as we can get. Kids to feed and all that, especially with this recession. We have to do what we have to do to survive.”

Sang continued looking them over but finally decided that they seemed normal enough, so he nodded in agreement. He had to straighten this NFL mug situation out. He hadn’t ordered any mugs. He had ordered commemorative plates.

“Yep,” he said. “It’s a real tough time out there. If you can get yourself a job, you milk it for as many hours as you can get. If people used to die from working too many hours, these days they kill you because you can’t get enough time in.”

“Ain’t that the truth,” the girlish man said, smiling.

“So, where’s the package at?”

“He’s got it, Mr. Sang,” the man answered, pointing to the foreign guy. “He has the jerseys, those NFL jerseys.”

“Jerseys? You got my package?” Sang interrogated, something in the back of his neck letting him know something wrong was happening here. They had said mugs and now they were talking about jerseys. He thought of his handgun in its holster in his coat. He moved his hand towards it, letting his palm hover over his heart. “You say they’re NFL jerseys? Did I hear you right? You said they were mugs before.”

“Yeah,” the other man said in a thick Eastern European accent. “NFL mugs.”

“So, give me the package,” Sang instructed, his fingertips touching the tip of the grip on his gun. He knew now. These two were some kind of hit squad, probably part of the same group of guys who had hit Waikiki Joe’s house earlier that day. “You ever deliver a package to a guy named Joe? You ever given him any NFL mugs or jerseys?”

“Joe?” the Russian man asked.

“Yeah,” Sang said, “a guy named Joe.”

“Lot of Joes out there. Lots of NFL mugs and jerseys.”

“Waikiki Joe.”

The Eastern European looked over at the effeminate American and they seemed to exchange information through that look. They had been found out. It was time to drop the charade and start shooting.

“Who are you guys?” Sang interrogated, his voice firm.

“We’re the guys here to give you your package,” the American man hissed.

“Yeah,” the Russian added. “Here it is. I’ll give you your package right now. Here’s your *package*, you dirty boy.”

The guard standing by the door had a bad complexion and couldn’t be more than twenty-four years of age. He had sandy brown hair and a hook nose. He breathed heavily, as if constantly sighing. His twiggy frame gave him the appearance of an awkward, sexually ambiguous rocker from the 1970s.

“You girls need any water?” he asked. “Any gum? I’ve got some gum.”

“No,” Nika answered.

"Well," the boy continued nervously, "you gals definitely had yourselves quite a day. Shootout and all that. Man, what a crazy day!"

"Yeah," Nika agreed.

"Man," the boy mumbled, "anybody ever tell you that you're a pretty girl? You look like one of those black actresses on the TV, like a colored angel."

"Colored?"

"Like a chocolate bunny. Like one of those bunnies you just want to eat up. Anybody ever try to eat you up, sweetie? You're like a colored angel."

"I lost my husband today," she said.

Their conversation was interrupted by the sound of three shots reverberating. BANG! BANG! BANG! The boy froze, then he heard somebody shouting: "It's Sang! It's Sang!" Then, there were more footsteps, people dashing back and forth.

"You'd better go," Nika suggested.

"Yeah, right," the boy murmured.

"Maybe your boss needs you," she said.

"Maybe you need to keep your mouth shut," he retorted, wiping sweat from his brow. He had to convince himself that nothing bad was happening. It was very important to keep his composure. He was just too much of a rookie for this kind of pressure.

"You sure you want to let your Chief of Police die on *your* watch?" Ellen Hawthorne asked, lifting an eyebrow.

"Seems like that would be something they would put on your permanent record," Nika added. "You'll never get another job in any police force anywhere."

"You two," the boy said, his lips trembling, "are just trying to mess with my head. You think that I'll leave the room and you'll be able to escape!"

"How can we escape?" Nika asked.

"We're handcuffed," Ellen Hawthorne observed.

"We wouldn't get very far," Nika insisted.

The boy seemed unconvinced but he heard more screaming and curiosity got the better of him. He muttered an "Awww hell!" and left the room. The women wouldn't be able to escape if they were handcuffed.

He raced down the hall to the front entrance. Outside the glass doors, he found a crowd of police men looking down at three dead bodies. One was Sang, a hole in his chest. The other two were men no one had ever seen before. They had been shot as well, in the legs.

A burly cop with mutton chops and a mustache approached the boy and patted him on the shoulder. The other officers continued conversing nervously, gesticulating wildly over the bodies. They were trying to piece it together.

"Seems that these guys came here to kidnap Sang or something," the burly cop said. "Sang pulled out his gun, managed to shoot one. Then, he went to shoot the other one but they shot each other at the same time. How crazy is that?"

"Pretty crazy," the boy replied. "Really crazy. This whole day is crazy."

"Where were you when you heard the shots? I was filling out some paperwork in my office, some old reports I needed to turn in. Came out here, everybody was talking to some eye witnesses, getting the story on what happened."

"What a crazy day!" the boy exclaimed. "A shootout. Then, some lady jumps out of a window and runs into a highway and kills herself. Then, these people come here and Sang ends up shot. What next?"

"Locusts!" the officer answered.

"That would be fitting. That would fit in just about right with a day like today."

"So, what were you doing when you heard the shots?"

"I was just watching over the two ladies," the boy replied. "I was standing watch in Sang's office, keeping an eye on the two female victims we picked up over at the bloodbath this morning. I left them in the office and came out here."

"You're not talking about those two women? The two African women? Please tell me you're not talking about that Hawthorne lady and the other one!"

"I am. It's alright, though. They're handcuffed. They're not going anywhere."

"Buddy," the burly officer pronounced, his eyes as wide as golf balls, "you'd better get yourself back there real quick! I mean real quick! Sang keeps the keys right in the doggone drawer!!!"

"Oh shit!" The boy muttered. "Oh shit!"

They were gone. Just like the proverbial wind. They danced with the wind, gliding towards their freedom. It lay somewhere, out there, amidst the disappointment and longing. They'd hit enough dead ends in life, dead ends culminating in the deaths of their most treasured others, a son and a husband. The only luck they had had was coming across the dumbest police force in the world.

Now, where their hopes had once been nurtured and where the smoldering ashes of the disappointment had burned a hole, something new had taken hold. Yes, it was a longing, but not a longing for love. It was the unquenchable thirst for revenge, the desire to hurt.

"How much farther until we get to New York City?" Hawthorne asked.

"A while, but we'll have to stop and steal another car," Nika replied.

"Have you done this before?"

"Done what?"

"Steal a car, Ms. Nika."

"Drex. It's not Ms. Nika. It's Nika Drex. And no, I've never stolen anything before in my life. This is the first time. This is the first car I've ever stolen."

"So, why do we have to get a new car? This one is working."

"We stole the Chief of Police's vehicle after escaping from custody. They'll most definitely be looking for this car. The car keys were in the drawer with the handcuff keys. They'll put two and two together."

They drove down I-95 South for another couple of minutes. It had been ten minutes since they had left Stamford behind. Nika began to wonder whether it was really necessary or not to steal another car. Perhaps they could make it before the cops had a chance to scramble after them. Perhaps they would make it to New York.

"We have some minutes until we get there," she whispered.

"What?"

"We have a few minutes of driving time, Madam President, and we have to make a choice. Either we stop somewhere and try to steal a car, or we risk it."

"Risk it?"

"We just keep driving with this car, the Chief of Police's car, and hope we make it all the way out of state. We hope to make it through New York down to the City. It'll be harder to track us inside the city with all that traffic."

"How long until we're out of this state?"

"Connecticut? Madam President, it will take us approximately five more minutes until we get around to Port Chester, going down I-95 here."

"What is this Port Chess-tah?"

"Port Chester is the first city in New York. Hell, never mind. I think we're going to make it across state lines. I think we'll be in New York before they can get us. We're going to make it. I think we might actually do it."

"Then, I will get to make my speech?"

"Yes, Madam President. I think you might be able to make that damned speech."

"Please, I have told you before. Please call me Ellen."

"Yes, Ellen. I think you're going to be making that damned speech."

"Then, Nika Drex, after the speech, after the crowds have grown silent and not a word is heard from a reporter, and not a chirp is heard from a pigeon, when I have been lauded by the liberal first world newspapers as a decent, good, responsible African woman – *then*, the real work begins, doesn't it? Then, the tiger is released from her cage."

Nika Drex nodded vigorously. They would both become vicious, shedding their human skin and adopting a new way of thinking. They were not murderers. They were studious women, academics, but now they would have to become panthers.

"Yes, Ellen. Then, we two bad bitches go crazy."

“Nika Drex, we will take these men who paid for your husband and my son to die, and we will teach them the true meaning of *suffering*. They will lift their faces to the Heavens asking for mercy, but will spit in their eyes and send them to the grave.”

Nike Drex closed her eyes momentarily and savored the sweet tender morsel of satisfaction those words provided her, a satisfaction that could only be more fulfilling once the subject matter of the words materialized in real life. Yes, she would only be satisfied once blood – rich, red blood – was spilled along with innards and ligaments and everything else that could be torn from a human body.

9. SURVIVORS

General Abel Thompson motioned for the boy to enter the living room and the child scuttled inside. He could not have been more than thirteen, his lanky frame lacking the self-confidence of Thompson’s more solid build.

“We have the girls, sir,” the boy said, his eyes directed at the ground.

“Are they good girls?” the General inquired.

“Good girls, sir?”

“Yes, boy,” the General laughed, his skin shining under the chandelier. “Are they pretty girls or are they ugly? Are they beautiful?”

“Well, sir,” the boy hesitated, biting his lower lip, “I-I don’t know.”

“You’re a man aren’t you?” the General sighed, his good mood waning slightly but not too much. He hated children. “You have a man’s equipment do you not? I take it you do not have a woman’s equipment, am I correct?”

“Yes. I mean, no. I mean... I am a man, sir.”

“Then, my man, give me your honest opinion. Are these village girls the men brought me any good or are they as ugly as a dirt mound?” the General chuckled, his good mood returning to him slowly. He would savor these young girls.

“I believe they are pretty girls, sir. Yes, they are.”

“And you’re going to take one of them today! What is your name my boy?”

“Thomas, sir. Must I take one of them? Because I’d rather not, sir.”

“Nonsense!” the General admonished. “Nonsense! Come, Thomas, you are new to the crew and it is for this reason that I have made you my butler. Please, come here to the couch and sit down next to me. Sit, my pretty boy.”

The boy stumbled his way across the living room, over the Persian carpet, to the chandelier. He sat down on the leather couch next to the General and noticed the soccer match on the television. His eyes lit up.

“You like football?” the General asked, noticing the boy’s smile.

“Yes, sir,” the boy answered. “Very much.”

“Here, son,” the General said, flipping open a gold case standing on the coffee table. The General removed some brownish powder and spread it over the table. Then, he pointed at the mound.

“What is that, sir?”

“Take this straw,” the General said, producing a straw from his pocket, “and use it to inhale this line, covering one of your nostrils with a finger. Yes, just like that. Good boy. Do what your master tells you. Do what your General tells you. Yes, be a good little boy.”

The boy leaned over the table and snorted the small mound. He coughed and the General patted him on the back numerous times. This boy was in training and would soon be integrated into the pack. The boy smiled at him, confused, in a drowsy state.

“You like this stuff, Thomas?” the General asked. “Do you like this heroin?”

“Yes, sir,” the boy replied. It made the pain of being an orphan less intense.

“Well, remember, that as long as you follow me your whole life, you will always have this stuff right here – but the second that you cross me and you refuse to do what I say, I must take it away from you and you will not be happy. Do you understand me, Thomas?”

“Yes, sir. I understand.”

“Good boy. Are you excited about taking your first woman? I assume it will be your first, of course, but I do not know. Maybe you have had others?”

“No, sir. It will be my first. May I have more of this powder, sir? I like it very much.”

The General laughed a deep, hearty laugh and slapped the boy on the back. Then, he opened the gold case and produced more of the powder, allowing the boy to inhale it with the straw. The boy coughed again, swaying back and forth now, barely able to keep the straw in his hand. He was so small that a little bit was enough to affect him.

“You are developing a taste for this very quickly,” the General said, smiling. “This is good because it will build your loyalty to me faster. You will be loyal to me, I know.”

“I am always loyal to you, sir.”

“Good boy. Now, the key to taking a village woman is not to be bothered, do you understand? You see, she will kick and scream and protest. This is but natural. This is what they do, the women. They do not want you to take them. The woman wants to protect her virginity the way a man wants to protect his possessions.”

“Maybe they are upset because they miss their families,” Thomas observed. “Maybe this is why they protest and cry.”

“No!” the General shouted, frowning. “No, no, no! They are disrespecting my authority and the authority of my men when they act in such a manner. They are disrespecting *your* authority, Thomas, because now you are one of my men. You have authority too.”

The boy smiled, beaming with pride. He had never been told that he possessed any power. Now, he was being told that he actually had authority over other people. He was in charge of them and they had to bow before him.

“Now,” the General continued, “bring me one of these women, one of the youngest ones, a girl your age perhaps, and I will show you how it is done. Remember that sometimes you must do what you have to do to impose your authority. Remember that it is - ”

General Abel Thompson stopped speaking because there, on the television, was the image of a dead woman. A woman who should have been killed before she ever had a chance to step up to that podium. It was Ellen Hawthorne, live and in living color. And she was speaking her mind, letting the whole world know how she felt.

Ladies and Gentlemen of the United Nations, I am President Ellen Hawthorne of Liberia. Over the past months, I have engaged in many machinations here with members of this body, asking for assistance, and I believe we have a coalition willing to press for UN action in my country. I believe we will move to address this issue and come to a resolution at this very meeting. I have been informed that such is the case.

It is an unusual thing, really. I mean, being the head of state for a country and asking foreign powers to come into your nation with their armies and their guns, asking them to wage battle in your nation. There could be no more unusual task. It is the strangest thing I have ever done.

Yet, I must confess that the Liberian people need you and they need your armies. We need you to embark upon this most unusual task because we cannot allow a man, a monster to rise to power and thrust Liberia into decades and decades of dictatorship and murder. General Abel Thompson and his armies represent a step backwards for Liberia and all of Africa. He killed my son today.

I am the democratically elected leader of my country. I was elected via an election that this very same body monitored and found to be legitimate in every way, shape, or form. My people chose me. And I must respect their choice. I must respect my countrymen.

I ask this body, on behalf of the Liberian people, to help preserve this fledgling democracy, to protect the right of the people in Liberia to cast votes for many elections to come, to keep us from falling into the hands of rebel leaders with an anti-democratic agenda, led by a man – a General Abel Thompson – who is nothing more than a murderous, evil thug who hired men to kill me. Those men tried to kill me today. They failed.

General Abel Thompson. He calls himself a General but he is no General. No, ladies and gentlemen. He is a merciless man, a thug and a killer, a killer and a fool with dreams of

power achieved at the cost of innocent men, women and children. He cares for nothing but his own power.

I therefore ask this body... no, I do not ask, I beg. I beg this body as a mother, as a woman seeking justice in the circumstances facing us in Africa, as a public servant representing the villagers of my homeland – I beg you to intervene and to send troops to Liberia to quell the antidemocratic uprising led by Mister Abel Thompson. I call him Mister because I do not respect him enough to use the honorific title of General. He is not worthy of such a title.

Abel Thompson could not move. It was as if he'd been stripped of his uniforms, hats, leather gloves and shining boots. It was as if this woman had ripped his loins from his body, made him surrender his man's heart. He was the woman now and she was the man.

"Sh-she must be a devil," Abel Thompson muttered. "She must be a heartless devil from the spirit realm. She is here to destroy me, to rob me of my soul. This Hawthorne woman is a creature from the other side!"

"Why did you kill her son, sir?" the boy asked stupidly.

Abel Thompson grabbed the boy by the throat and choked him, his eyes protruding from his skull. Then, he stepped away from the boy and drew his pistol. He shot the boy three times and the tiny figure fell dead onto the carpet.

One of the servants rushed into the room, surveying the scene. The man saw the dead boy and drew breath. But this servant was an older man and knew better than to say anything at all when Thompson was angry.

"Take this child away," Abel Thompson said to the servant, pointing to the dead boy. "Take him away from here and bring me a new boy, about his age. Yes, bring me a new little boy just like him, please."

Nika Drex watched the speech on a small television inside a diner on Fifth Avenue. It was a vegetarian diner and even the coffee tasted expensive. She thought about her husband, the only man in the world she had ever loved. The only man she had ever been with.

His image flashed before her eyes. Drex painting nature scenes with his silly French beret. Drex trying to cut down firewood but slipping and falling multiple times onto the snow. Drex taking her sledding and crashing into the side of a log cabin.

That had been her Drex. The man she had learned to love with all his imperfections and now had to learn to live without. It was a difficult task. Once we grow accustomed to someone, that other person becomes like a scar or a distinguishing facial feature – something that marks us, something we can never think of ourselves lacking.

She had been told to call a number and she dialed it as it had been given to her. The phone rang twice before a baritone answered aggressively. The man on the other line sounded preoccupied. He was worried about his future, about his plans for domination.

"Who is this?"

"My name is Nika Drex. I'm calling from New York City, in the United States of America. I was given this number to call."

"Yeah. What do you want from me? I'm busy right now. I do not know you."

"Is this General Abel Thompson?"

"Yes, it is. Who are you, Nika Drex?"

She paused and inhaled, trying to keep herself calm. She was the woman who was going to put a bullet in his skull. She was the woman who would burn his house down. She was the woman who would shatter all hopes he had of ruling anything more than his own tombstone. She was his killer.

"I'm calling to tell you that your days breathing on this earth are going to be very, very limited before I kill you. So, enjoy them. Go out for walks in the sun. Go to church. Tell the people you love that you love them. If you love anyone – and I'm not sure that you do – you should let them know it now."

"Why would I go and do something like that?" the man asked sarcastically.

"Because," she pronounced, "I'm going to chop your testicles off. You're not going to be a man anymore after I am done with you."

The man began cursing and she hung up the phone on him. She truly hoped that he would heed her call. She hoped that he would enjoy his next few days. That way, the memory of that happiness would be fresh in his mind when she began to strip every shred of humanity he possessed and transformed him into her prey. Then, the contrast of his happy days and his new hell would augment his pain.

"You alright sweetie pie?" a voice inquired.

She turned towards the sound and found a boy of about eighteen, drunk with a shaved head standing next to her. He sat down at the counter and ordered a coffee. Then, he winked at her. He was wearing red suspenders and tight jeans.

"What's your name?" he asked, extending his hand.

"Nika," she answered, shaking his hand.

"Want to get down, Nika?"

"What?"

"You heard me."

"I don't understand."

"Do you want to work out, Nika?"

"Work out?"

"Yeah, sweetie. Do you wanna work out?"

She grabbed the ketchup and smashed it into the side of the boy's head. Then, she jumped off the stool and kicked him in the ribs. He fell to the ground and she stomped him until he was a bloody mess.

Then, she spit on him, left cash on the counter to pay her bill, and strolled out. She collapsed as she crossed the street, a sense of longing hitting her hard. Her *husband*. She had loved him as few women could love a man and if she had been able to jump in front of the bullet that ultimately killed him, she would have made that jump gladly. That was love.

General Abel Thompson did not love anyone. Love was for fools, for the weak. He sat across from his adviser, a short man with a wounded look about him, so dark that he seemed to be constructed out of coal, a professional man wearing a neat suit with a nervous demeanor. He wore a permanent smile and Thompson trusted him completely. There was nothing which could inspire trust as much as plainness, and his adviser was so plain and uninteresting that he could make the long, humid days of an African landscape even longer.

"I checked up on the situation for you, sir," the man said, "as you requested. You asked me as your advisor to investigate the matter, to find out what happened and what is likely to occur. I am ready to provide you with a report."

The General nodded without speaking a word by way of response. He didn't need to speak. His power came from fear. Those women – this Drex and that damned Hawthorne – may not fear him but everyone else, everyone sane, did.

"Well," the man continued, "I did as you asked. It is apparent that there was some sort of shootout. It is also apparent that Hawthorne survived the shootout and was moved to a police station where Mr. Wentworth and his associate engaged in another shootout. It appears the entire team we hired for the mission failed in their multiple attempts to kill Hawthorne."

"What about *them*?" the General inquired, his voice a hollow whisper.

"Them?"

"Yes," the General responded, his voice devoid of any sense of morality or sentiment. "I want to know how many of the people protecting this vile whore Hawthorne we killed. I want to know how much blood we spilled. Did we kill her son? Did we destroy the child she loves? If you kill the child of the demon, the demon dies."

The man appeared to wince. His eyes darted about the room, as if searching for an escape route. He rubbed his temples. Thompson was quite clearly a man without any ties to the real world. Such a man could kill anyone at any moment.

"Sir," the advisor responded slowly, "the initial reports indicated that her son had been killed, along with several other individuals. It was also reported that the Chief of Police, a man named Sang, had also been killed. All of the news services reported these men as dead but it appears that the news services were not correct."

The man swallowed before continuing. His hands were trembling now. A man as crazy as Abel Thompson could fry you up and eat you as easily as commend you and hand you a reward for good service. He had to choose his words.

“Revived,” the man concluded emphatically. “They were able to be revived. The medical services were able to care for them. They are alive, sir.”

“Revived?” the General asked.

“They are in the Stamford Hospital, one of the local area hospitals in that community, sir. They were thought dead but they somehow managed to pull through. It appears that both this man named Sang and Hawthorne’s son are alive in intensive care. And there is more, sir.”

“More?” the General growled quietly, his anger suppressed.

“Yes, sir. It appears that this man, this *Waikiki Joe* also miraculously survived the ordeal. He was also reported dead but pulled through somehow. It appears that there were many, many survivors. It appears that no one on their side really lost people at all for the most part, aside from a man named Phillips and another one by the name of Officer Rey. The loss was almost entirely on our side as she was able to make her address.”

Thompson stood up and kicked his advisor’s jaw with a straight shot to the face. The man got up, covering his bleeding mouth, and ran out of the room. Thompson considered running after him to shoot him in the back, but he collapsed and sat down, covering his face. It was all coming apart... all because of some fucking broads...

He had survived! Waikiki Joe felt as if he had just woken up from a daydream. It was if he’d seen himself get shot, die, crawl towards a light and then drop down back to earth, climb back into his body and open his eyes. The strangest part had been his death.

He had flown up into the clouds and met a man with a long white beard. The man had identified himself as “Saint Peter,” the guardian of the Holy Gates,” and then he had informed Joe that his love for sinful things had earned him a trip down the elevator to the Gates of Hell. So, Joe had taken the elevator down and had ended up speaking face to face with the devil, a blue-faced creature with twisted horns.

The devil, however, had told him that he didn’t want some fat wanker stinking up the place with his sweat so that he didn’t want him in the darkest of places. So, Joe had taken the elevator back up to speak to Saint Peter. Realizing that they didn’t want him in Heaven and they couldn’t stand to have him in Hell, Peter had pushed him off the cloud and he had fallen back to Earth. Back into his body.

“Jerk-off Saint Peter,” Joe mumbled, blinking his eyes to focus his vision. He turned his head to look at the bed next to his and saw Sang there, holding a remote control, watching a soap opera unashamedly. “What are you doing, Sang? Those soaps will rot your brain! Stop watching that stuff! Turn it off!”

“Shut up!” Sang snapped, absorbed by the images. “I’m trying to find out if Brixton really did love Penelope or whether he fell in love with the fiesty plumber’s daughter from Singapore, Lela. Jeeze I hope Maddox stays with Brianna and Roxxie doesn’t leave Lordan. It would break Tristan’s heart if that relationship doesn’t work out.”

“Lordan,” Waikiki Joe grumbled. “You’re a grown man watching a show with a character named Lordan? Tristan? Roxxie?”

“Shut up. Lordan is awesome. He races cars and lifts weights. Plus, he hooks up with tons of hot chicks. Your name is stupid. I’ve never met a man named Waikiki before.”

“Lordan?”

“Yes, Joe. It’s a classy name. Like Xander or Kentington. Get wise.”

The room had three beds, carefully lined up like combs on the sink of an anal retentive man’s home. In the bed closest to the door was Waikiki Joe, tubes in his chest. The middle bed was occupied by Sang, his skin a greenish blue, his eyes stuffed tightly into his head. They looked like survivors, which is what they were. Survivors from a nuclear blast that had hit Stamford. A voice suddenly made itself known from the third and final bed, the one farthest from the door.

“Turn it off!” the voice shouted. “Please, I beg you. Turn this off! Change the channel! Anything but this! You’ve been watching this stuff all day.”

"Alfred? Is that you?" Waikiki Joe asked.

"Yes!" the voice answered. "I've been shot and I've come back from the dead and I want to die again because you're making me watch this crap."

"It's not crap," Sang argued, "it's my favorite soap opera, *The Insane Megalomaniacs of Eastern Malibu*. It's an amazing, Hamlet-like work of art that paints an incredible portrait of humanity's struggle with the meaning of its existence."

"Please kill me now," Alfred begged.

"Oh, stop being dramatic," Sang cajoled, "you're a drama queen like Sparx McHenry, Ronald Dollman's sweet and slinky beauty from El Salvador. She's just like you."

"She's an El Salvadoran named Sparx McHenry?" Joe asked.

"Yes," Sang replied. "Her dad, Boone McHenry, worked for the Red Cross and was killed by an evil gang of tattooed miscreants known as the Homies of Death. Her mother was from El Salvador, the beautiful Maria."

"Turn this off!" Alfred screamed. "Just turn it off! This is as bad as getting shot!"

Meanwhile, the women were doing the hard work. In their minds, they had lost everyone. Nika Drex sat next to Ellen Hawthorne on the park bench in Central Park. They watched as the families strolled past them. They hated the happiness those families seemed to exhibit. Where had their happiness gone? They had no idea that their loved ones were watching soap operas less than an hour outside the city.

"What happens now?" Nika asked, her voice muted.

"Now, we go to war. The UN voted to approve the use of peacekeeping troops in my country. That means boots on the ground, the stabilization of Liberia."

"What about getting this General Thompson? I want to get the man who had my husband killed! I need revenge. I need blood, Ellen."

"Well," Hawthorne said, reaching into her pocket and pulling out two tickets, "I was able to arrange for a flight back to my country. These tickets will take us to Nigeria. From there, we will take a small plane to Liberia. Once we are in my executive mansion, we will have access to firearms and soldiers. Then, we will strike."

"With all due respect Madam President," Nika pronounced, "we don't need any soldiers. The two of us can take care of this situation as well as anyone else. I say the two of us get ourselves to Liberia, grab some guns from your executive mansion, and then we start to do some killing. We do it all alone. We savor every drop of their blood."

Ellen Hawthorne considered the matter and thoughts of her dead son flooded her mind. She thought of his feet, kicking, as she changed his diapers. She thought about the way he used to smile as she nursed him. She saw him crawling about, his hands and feet covered by the African mud. She thought about the warmth of his body the last time they hugged.

"You're right," she concluded, nodding vigorously. "You're right, Nika. If anyone else participates, it just wouldn't be the same. If someone else gutted him, I wouldn't have the same satisfaction, the same sense of closure. I need to be the one to carve his spleen out from his body. I need to be the one to look at him in the face and point my finger at him and let him know that I'm torturing him because he's the one who took the most precious thing in the world from me – he took my boy."

"We do this on our own, Ellen. No help. We take the trip out there. We get the guns. We find this General Thompson and we kill him for what he did to us."

The New York sky seemed to agree with that statement because it began to cry. It was not a hard rain, just a light drizzle, but both women looked up as if the falling water signified something, as if it was a portent to be understood. The days of the murdering General Thompson were to come to an end.

They raced away from the water, across a square and down concrete steps with metal railings. Arriving at the bottom of the steps, their backs to the vast park with its towering trees and joggers, they saw the line of yellow cabs parked near the curb. They walked towards the nearest cab and climbed inside.

The driver was a skinny Indian with a toothy grin. He nodded at the two women and asked them where they needed to go. The cab smelled faintly of recently devoured cheeseburgers. It was not a clean cab.

"To the airport," Nika declared.

"To the airport!" Hawthorne shouted somewhat louder, her voice filled with more rancor for a mother's love is a powerful force indeed. She needed to shed blood for her son.

The car raced off, swerving in and out of traffic as the mist slid against the windshield. The wire-thin driver swore loudly in his native tongue and shook his fist at another cabbie. In a matter of minutes, they were there. Their flight would leave in a matter of hours. Soon enough, they would be in Africa.

Alfred dialed his mother's number and waited. Immediately, he was sent into her voicemail and hung up. He banged the phone against the metal rails attached to his bed. He stared up at the white ceiling and threw his gaze around the room.

Joe and Sang were sitting up, sitting on their beds, using a small table between their beds to play chess. They appeared to be at peace, worriless, but Alfred could not help but feel that his mother's life might still be in danger. Why wasn't she answering her phone? He got up from the bed and paced, a sharp pang hitting him with every step.

Joe looked up from his game and Sang turned around.

"What the hell are you doing?" Sang asked. "You're supposed to be relaxing, recovering. You've been shot, declared dead and resurrected. In a situation like this one, the correct procedure is to get back in bed and take it easy."

"That's right," Joe concurred, "that is the correct procedure."

Alfred stopped pacing and his eyes watering, a solitary tear running down his cheek. He quickly wiped it with the back of his palm. His mother. He was worried about his mom. He loved that old lady.

"What you should do is call your kid, your woman," Joe said. "They're probably as worried about you as you are about your mother. You saw the TV. Your mother made it out of the shootout without so much as a scar. She addressed an assembly."

"She's a toughie," Sang observed.

"You should call your girl and your kid," Joe reiterated.

"I know, I know," Alfred grumbled. "I'm just so worried about my mom. I'm afraid she might try to do something stupid. She's a bullheaded woman that one."

"Hard as a tank," Sang said. "She's a toughie."

"You should call your family," Joe repeated a third time.

"I'm afraid she's going to try to go to Liberia and put a bullet in someone's head," Alfred said, lips trembling. "I'm afraid she's not going to be getting out of there alive. I'm afraid whoever she meets out there will take her head off."

"I'd be worried about the guy," Joe noted.

Just then, a figure in a hospital robe appeared at the door. He was unusually pale with deep set, wild eyes. His robe was white with a red flower pattern, as were all the robes at the hospital, as were the robes Joe, Alfred and Sang wore. The man smiled a sad grin and waved but the men did not recognize him at first.

"Drex!" Joe shouted, finally recognizing the man. "Drex, I thought you were dead!"

"I was," Drex replied. "I was as dead as a doornail, gentlemen. I died. I died and came back from the dead. Riddled with bullets, declared dead, but somehow I pulled through. I'm not sure how, exactly, but I made it."

"That's the same thing that happened to me!" Sang exclaimed. "And to Joe! And to Alfie over here! We all died."

"Don't call me Alfie," Alfred corrected. "I prefer Alfred."

"And to Alfred over here!" Sang exclaimed.

"I know, I know," Drex said. "I heard all about it actually. I spoke with the doctors and they told me all about it. This is the first time I've been out of bed since I've gotten here. All shot up, you know. Man, I can't believe it's been twenty-four hours since the shootout."

"I know!" Sang agreed. "Seems like just a few minutes ago."

"Yeah!" Drex nodded his head. "Yeah, it does. I still think about everything that happened during the shootout. You know, Joe's house collapsing on top of us. I think about the guy with the flamethrower. The rocket launcher. I think about the whole thing over and

over and I ask myself: 'did that really happen?' Because the truth of it is that it seems pretty crazy. I mean, it might just be me. I could just be me."

"No, no," Joe said. "You're right. The whole thing seems pretty crazy. A shootout in Stamford, Connecticut, of all places. A shootout with guns blazing, my house collapsing, a flamethrower, a rocket launcher. People burning and exploding. It was pretty intense."

"Very intense!" Sang emphasized. "I wasn't there, at the shootout in the house. I had my own shootout with two guys outside the police station. I was like Charles Bronson - "

"Charles who?" Alfred interrupted.

"He's too young," Joe stated sadly. "He's too young to know the Brons. The greatest actor of a generation. You have to go back for that one. What an actor! What acting chops! It was one good movie after another. He should have won an academy award."

"The academy would never honor a hero like that," Sang lamented. "But anyways, I shot those two clowns and, unfortunately, I got shot too. I mean, I'm pretty sure I killed them. I popped bullets right into them, like Charles Bronson. Or Bruce Lee because, you know, I'm Asian."

"Bruce Lee never shot anyone," Alfred noted. "He used Kung Fu."

A doctor appeared from behind Drex and patted him on the back. He was a tall man with spectacles and a gentle demeanor. He exuded an air of competence. He also exuded that pampered, patrician style mixed with humanism perpetuated by most medical men.

"Now, now, Mr. Drex," the doctor cajoled, "let's not over-extend ourselves. You were a dead man yesterday and you're living and breathing today. We wouldn't want to go back to the grave, now would we? No, we wouldn't want that. What do you say we get you back to bed, sir?"

Drex smiled sheepishly and pointed at the doctor playfully. The man had saved his life and he felt no small measure of gratitude. If it wasn't for him, he wouldn't be able to see his Nika again, and the thought of that was too much to bear.

"What a breaker!" he proclaimed before shuffling off. "We've got ourselves a real buster here in our good doctor. Where did you go to medical school? Ryker's Island?"

After Drex and the doctor had left, Joe surveyed the other men with a glint of amusement in his eyes. Another one of their companions had been able to make it through. Their pack was stronger than he had anticipated. They had lost Phillips and Rey, but those had been single men.

"I can't believe Drex is alive!" he exclaimed. "I thought for sure that little cracker had bitten the big one! But he pulled through!"

"Life is amazing," Sang said, returning his gaze to the chess game. He moved a piece and declared: "Checkmate! Life is amazing!"

The doctor walked Drex back to his room, to the farthest of the three beds, the one most distant from the corridor. Drex's two roommates were an older black woman with thick glasses and a balding head and a forty-three-year-old construction worker with olive skin. The doctor helped Drex get into his bed and patted him on the back. Drex looked up with a helpless smile.

"There you go Mr. Drex," the doctor said. "I'll see you again tomorrow. Hopefully we'll be even better. Hopefully, we'll be in tip top shape soon enough."

"When can we get out of here?"

"It'll be a while, Mr. Drex. It'll be a while with all you boys from the shootout. You, Mr. Sang and Mr. Waikiki and Mr. Hawthorne – and the other three, of course. Those fellows will be in here a while too before they get shipped off to prison."

"The other *three*?" Drex asked, his voice full of dread and terror. "What other three?"

"Three of the other fellows from the shootout. They're down the corridor a little ways. Two Americans and an Eastern European gentleman. I believe they might have been in a different shootout – or, hell, maybe both. What do I know? I'm just a doctor. A police officer stays in the room with them at all times. I think they're the fellows who shot Chief Sang."

The doctor patted Drex on the back again and walked out of the room. It had been truly miraculous. So many men declared dead and so many men brought back to life! As a

medical professional, he felt no small sense of pride in this accomplishment. They had labored intensely to save these lives and they had done it.

Leaving Drex sweating on the bed, his lips contorted, the doctor hummed his way down the corridor to the room with the police man and the other three patients. The police officer was a large man, tall with a bulging gut. He nodded at the doctor as he entered the room. He was one of a rotating group of officers watching over the prisoners.

"How are these boys?" the doctor asked.

"I hope they die," the officer responded flatly.

"Now, now," the doctor chuckled, "let's not be too biblical here. There's no need for the punishment to be too severe, not at this hospital."

"These scumbags shot and killed people – good people."

The doctor shrugged and surveyed his patients. He directed himself to a young man who had refused to provide his full name, asking to be referred to simply as "AJ." Similarly, the Eastern European man had refused to provide his name and the doctor had taken to calling him "Boris" for no reason other than that was the only Eastern Bloc name he knew. Last, was a man who had identified himself as "Wentworth." Wentworth was awake.

"What's the damage, doc?" Wentworth inquired, smiling haughtily. "Am I gonna live? Am I gonna die here in Stamford of all places?"

"You were very lucky," the doctor said. "All of you who survived this ordeal were damn lucky. How you all survived, I'll never know. It was as if the world had different plans for each of you."

"Fate!" Wentworth exclaimed jokingly. "We're doomed to chase each other into eternity. These deaths will never stop. We'll just keep on shooting each other forever."

"What deaths, Mr. Wentworth?"

"Oh, it's just Wentworth. No need for the Mister, doc. No formalities here. Oh, I'm talking about all the deaths that will pile up before this thing is finally resolved. More deaths are coming. A lot more."

"Resolved?"

"Yeah, doc. *Resolved*. You see, this thing is far from over. That three-legged, one-eyed old cow of a woman Hawthorne – she's still alive, isn't she, that old bitch? She made that address, the old broad."

"That's what the TV said, Mr. Wentworth."

"I know. It was a *rhetorical* question. That old crow has to go the way of Australopithecus, into the void of what was once great but now is useless in this new age of immorality. The Muhammad Alis, the MLKs, the Michael Collinses, the Samuel Gomperses, the Mahatma Gandhis – the uplifting leader is a dying breed being replaced by men who neither care nor try to pretend to help but only look out for themselves."

"Kill or be killed, is that it Mr. Wentworth?"

While the doctor stood there, mouth agape, he failed to notice a hand slipping into one of his pockets, digging around. He failed to notice that hand finding its target and slinking out of the pocket with a shiny object.

"No, no, no, no, no. Kill or be killed was the rule in the past, before a brief spurt of civility forced us into a dream of human rights. But no one has a *right* to anything, not even to breathe. It's not kill or be killed because there is something far more base than death. *Dreams*. That's what we're talking about. The right to *dream*. No one has that right anymore. It's a new world, doc. We live without the right to dream."

"You're getting agitated, Mr. Wentworth. Let's stop this discussion and talk about your condition. You're lucky because the bullet that hit you missed all your major arteries. You'll need time to rest and some monitoring, but I expect you will eventually make it out of here and back to your own life."

The doctor walked away from Wentworth and strolled out of the room. He had better things to do than discuss world politics with someone who was quite clearly a criminal. The criminal, however, was a survivor and someone slimier than a greased rattlesnake, someone able to escape when trapped in tight corners, someone who would find his way out of this hospital soon enough, guard or no guard.

When the Russian finally awoke, he found Wentworth staring at him unblinkingly with a malevolent glow. He was paler, his eyes possessed by red circles and his lips dry and cracked. He looked a bit like a devil in the darkness with only the lights of the heart monitor illuminating his features.

"Hello," he whispered, chuckling coldly.

"Hello," the Russian responded. He swallowed and his saliva seemed to be as thick as syrup. "Where do we go from here? Are we dead men?"

"From here? Well, my friend, we go exactly back where we came from. That's the only place to go when you get lost, isn't it? Back home. We're going back to square one."

"Home?"

"Oh, you Eastern types are so literal!" Wentworth guffawed hypnotically. "I don't mean *home* literally. I mean square one. First base. Like in baseball."

"I don't play baseball," the Russian answered flatly.

"Yes, I know," Wentworth whimpered, his voice unusually high-pitched. "I know. I mean that we have to go back to where all of this started. She'll be back in Liberia. She completed her task here, made her little speech, got herself help to squash General Thompson – she got everything she could possibly have wanted. So, she's going home. She's going there to gloat."

"Why not wait here until after the UN deploys the troops and it is safe for her to return? That would make more sense. It would make no sense to go back now."

"She's a woman," Wentworth hissed. "She doesn't make sense. She's a vile, dirty little woman like all of them. She wants to let him know that she's not afraid of him. She wants General Thompson to know that he's been beaten, that they're coming to get him. Or, she wants to put a bullet in his head herself."

The Russian nodded in agreement. The media had painted Ellen Hawthorne as a heroine for the first world, a woman who fought for democracy, but she was a *Liberian* at heart and that meant that she had to deal with a different world. Her world was not neat or safe, her experience with politics more brutal and personal. She had to be tough.

In her world, an enemy had to be vanquished in such a way that the various elements of her society would know she had slain him. In her world, even as a woman, she had to show strength or she would be engulfed. She had to show that she was as tough as a man.

"She will go back," the Russian concluded in agreement. "She might be there already. Or at least on her way. If we want her, we have to go back."

"Then, we must meet her there. You see, if we kill her, at least we meet Thompson's people with some kind of accomplishment. We pray they spare us."

"There is no way out of here. There's an officer either in the room or right outside our door twenty-four-seven. We're trapped."

"I took *this* out of the good doctor's pocket," Wentworth said, producing a scalpel. "He cut some bandages off me yesterday and I saw him put the scalpel in his coat pocket. Today, I decided to take it for us. Now, we have the scalpel."

"We've just been shot," the Russian murmured. "Do you really expect to be able to slit a police officer's throat? He'll grab you and twist you and snap you into two pieces before you get anywhere near him."

From the end of the room a voice announced: "I'll do it!" It was A.J., his face mostly covered by bandages. He had been resurrected along with all the rest of them. His had been the ugliest injuries. He was like a mummy, his face hidden, his lips twisted.

"I'll kill him," he reiterated. "I'll kill him and then I'll kill that bitch Hawthorne just for the fun of watching her bleed. I'm going to carve her up like a Christmas turkey. We're going to get the hell out of this madhouse hospital, going out to Africa on the first flight out to Nigeria. From there, I know a man who can take us to Liberia. We leave as soon as we can. We leave and we meet her in Africa and we stab her a hundred times, until that succubus is a pile of putty and crimson. We leave nothing! We leave NOTHING! The bitch dies!"

10. SHOWDOWN IN AFRICA

The Liberian jungle was on fire with the variety of noises that make up the thick African wilderness. Here, there was a chirp. There, over there, there was the sound of an animal stepping on a vine. Water from a recent rain storm wafted down onto the dirt floor of the forest. The sun filtered in slyly, like a seductress slipping off a silk dress.

Amidst the orchestra, a perched bird was able to spot the sight of two figures, ape-like in their form, crossing the sea of leaves and branches. No, the bird reasoned, cocking its head to the side. No, those were not apes. Well, to be precise, they were apes, but apes of a different sort than the ones he was used to seeing. Most apes that crossed through these parts had hair all over their bodies. Not these.

As the forms neared, the bird was able to see that they were humans, creatures he rarely saw walking through the jungle in pairs. Humans tended to move in larger packs than that, usually ten to fifteen making their way to the markets carrying goods. The bird squeaked in surprise when he saw that they were women! An unusual sight indeed – two human females wandering about alone.

“Nika,” one of the females panted, adjusting the submachine gun hanging from a strap over her arm, “I need to rest. I can’t go any further. I’m going to pass out.”

“Let the thirst for revenge fill you with energy,” Nika Drex replied unsympathetically. They had to get to the house before word got out that they were in Liberia. “We have to keep going, Madam President.”

“No, Nika,” Ellen Hawthorne said. “I am older than you and I must rest.”

Nika nodded and they proceeded to a miniscule clearing flooded by light. Nika placed her submachine gun on her lap and Hawthorne placed hers on the grass. They had been walking for sixteen hours. Nika removed her boots and stretched her toes.

“We’re almost there,” Nika whispered. Then, she repeated more loudly, “we’re almost there, Ellen! We’re almost there!”

“How much time do we have left, Nika?”

“Another two hours,” Nika answered. “As soon as we’re there, we do what we talked about earlier. You said he has women brought to him regularly from the surrounding villages, right? You said that happens every day at five in the afternoon.”

“Like clockwork, Nika. My sources tell me he sends two armed men out to the villages using the path leading into the house. The men ride out at five and return by six. The villagers would rather give Thompson their young women than face him, but they are ready for a new way of thinking, ready to respect themselves.”

“Good. This gives us our opportunity. The car with the thugs leaves the house and we position ourselves along the road, a short ways down from the house, far enough that the shots can’t be heard. Then, we take the car and get into the house. Meanwhile, while we walk, you call your friends and prepare everything.”

The women shared a loaf of bread Nika had brought in one of her coat pockets, eating silently, two furious women dressed in camouflage pants, caps, shirts, and coats with black military boots. After devouring their bread, they lifted themselves off the ground and continued their walk through the woods.

For two hours, they carefully maneuvered through the brush. At least, it wasn’t raining anymore. For the first ten hours of their hike, they had been soaked by unceasing waves of a tropical barrage. Their clothes were wet and uncomfortable but they cared not for such luxuries as dry clothes. They cared not for comfort at all. The comfort would come when they finally arrived at Thompson’s home and shot him between the eyes.

They did not speak, both of them fixated on avenging their loved ones. Nika kept thinking of the various moments when her husband had made her smile – too many to count. He had been a sheepish man but a loving one, willing to play dominoes with the children of visiting relatives, to keep a tiny notebook full of jokes he had heard so he could tell the jokes to his beloved wife later. Ellen Hawthorne thought of Alfred, a good boy at heart, although often misguided in his attempts to protect his family. Hawthorne made the phone calls she needed to make to prepare for what would come.

Suddenly, the woods died out and they were faced with a massive field stretching over the equivalent of seven city blocks until the grass reached a mansion. The four-floor residence was surrounded by stone walls. The architecture was modeled after homes in California, the walls stucco and the roofs tiled, the arches copying Spanish architecture. A massive cast iron gate blocked the entrance into the property.

A short walk from the home, far enough so that the sounds of the landing aircraft were but a hum as opposed to a roar, was a small concrete helicopter landing pad surrounded by a chain-link fence. The two women crawled through the tall grass, one following the other, their machine guns on their backs, until they were just outside of the landing pad. Men were on that landing pad, waiting.

“Get out!” the pilot shouted after Wentworth handed him the money. “Get the hell out! I have other work to do. This place is death! Get out!”

Wentworth nodded and motioned for the others sitting on the benches in the back of the helicopter to get up. A.J. and the Russian rose to their feet and followed Wentworth as he went down the steps and out onto the concrete.

The pilot did not wait long. These were dangerous parts. Only a fool would hang around too long. There was a saying about General Abel Thompson – he treated every guest like a prisoner. If you spent too much time breathing the same air as the General, you tended to end up losing your head. The helicopter lifted off and sped away over the trees.

There were five men on the helicopter landing pad – Wentworth, A.J., the Russian, and two large African men in suits each weighing well over two hundred and forty pounds. These were Abel Thompson’s lackeys. They approached the three foreigners with their hands extended, both of them shaking with Wentworth.

“We’re here to take you to the General,” one of them said from behind his aviator shades. They were both wearing the same shades. In fact, they were both wearing the exact same black suit and red tie combo. “Please follow us to the car, sir.”

The man pointed to a small Opel Meriva parked near the landing pad. Wentworth looked over the two men and frowned. How would five men – including two giants – fit into a compact mini? He surveyed the two men’s faces for an answer but the two Africans stood perfectly still, as if they had all the time in the world.

“How are we supposed to fit into *that*?” He finally asked, exasperated.

“What do you mean?” the lackey asked in return.

“It’s a *mini*!” Wentworth shouted.

“Well,” the lackey answered (only one of the two spoke), “it will be a heck of a lot easier once we adjust you.”

“Adjust me?” Wentworth inquired.

He noticed that the silent one of the two lackeys was carrying a briefcase. The silent man opened his briefcase without muttering a word and removed a saw. The mute stood there holding that saw.

“Oh my God,” Wentworth muttered. “No, No! He promised us we could speak to him! He said it was going to be o.k.! He said he understood! He said he understood the situation! He gave me his word!”

A.J. reached for his pistol, tucked in the pocket of his blue fleece jacket and the Russian reached for his, jammed in a holster under his light brown suit coat. The talkative lackey was far faster, far more precise than even these experienced assassins.

Blam!

Blam! Blam!

Two shots were all it took. One landed in A.J.’s skull and the other split apart the Russian’s head. A.J. fell back, dead, as did the Russian. The talker walked past Wentworth, standing there, mouth agape, and removed his aviator shades. He knelt down near A.J. and surveyed him from head to toe, from the brown shoes to the kaki pants to the white t-shirt and blue fleece. Then, he placed the barrel of his gun in between his eyes and fired another shot. They were much more efficient in their murders in Africa than in the United States.

Then, the talkative man walked over to the Russian, also already dead, knelt down and repeated the procedure. The Russian had been wearing black pants and black shoes and a

black t-shirt, such that his blood-soaked clothes looked clean apart from the once-brown coat, now a dark purple after having absorbed so much liquid.

"P-p-please," Wentworth begged, his hands raised above his head. "Please don't kill me! I'll give you as much money as you need. He said he understood! The General said he understood! He promised!"

The talker motioned towards the Opel and the silent man walked towards the vehicle and opened the door. Wentworth stared, confused, his palms pointing to the two men. He shifted from foot to foot, his hands up in the air, making it appear that he was dancing in some form of ritual. He looked like a Native American begging the skies for rain.

"Get in the car," the talker stated flatly.

"W-w-why?" Wentworth replied, tears streaming down his cheeks.

"Get in the car," the talker repeated in the same tone. "The General wants to speak to you personally. He wants to hear an apology from you – and to kill you *himself*."

"After torturing you," the silent man said, finally speaking. "He likes to take people who fail him like you did and hang them upside down and let the blood rush to their heads. At some point, the head fills up with so much blood that you actually die."

"A blood clot forms in your brain," the talker explained. "You die from a sort of stroke, but not before blood pools in your lungs, making it hard for you to breath. At the same time, you'll be beaten repeatedly."

"The beatings are a good thing, really," the silent man mused, "because they'll cause you to die faster. You'll want to die as fast as you can."

Wentworth had been assured that he would be greeted with open arms, forgiven, allowed a second chance to pull off the Hawthorne assassination as well as any other jobs he needed to help the General, to repay him for his ineffectiveness. The General had even paid him for some of his expenses incurred as a result of the bloodbath in Stamford.

"I shouldn't have come!" Wentworth shouted, crying hysterically.

"No," the talker agreed, shaking his head, "but people are always full of foolish hope. They always yearn for forgiveness, believe that they will be given an opportunity for a fresh start. It is human nature. You are not the first man who made such an error in judgment."

"I should have run away!" Wentworth yelped, falling to his knees.

"No," the talker answered. "The General would have found you, and then your torture may even have been worse. There are men he kept alive for years just to amuse himself by causing them pain."

The talker nodded at the silent man and the two of them approached Wentworth. They patted him down and found a pistol. The talker tucked the pistol into his belt and the two men picked up Wentworth by his arms and carried him to the Opel. He hung limply, like an injured child, as they transported him.

They had almost reached the car when they heard a voice whispering from the tall grass: "*Hey fellas, thanks for the car!*" Then, there was the sound of machine gun fire and bullet-ridden bodies collapsing onto concrete.

The two women had struck gold. They wouldn't have to wait for a convoy sent to pick up young girls. Seizing the opportunity, they had positioned themselves just outside the gate. Then, the two African men had executed all but one of their victims. They had shot the two and left Wentworth alive, lying on the concrete, panting.

"Are you o.k.?" Hawthorne asked the man.

Wentworth blinked and tried to recuperate his calm. It was like a hallucination. Right there, in front of him, Ellen Hawthorne. Was he dreaming? No, he concluded, his heart slowing down from its rabbit-like pace back to a semi-human one. She was really here. He reasoned as quickly and as well as he could given the circumstances – *she must be here to kill Thompson. I can kill her myself and bring Thompson her body, try to get him to let me live. But he might kill me even if I give him Hawthorne. I could help her kill him, make sure that he doesn't come after me...*

"Are you alright, sir?" Hawthorne asked him again.

"Yes, yes," Wentworth answered, nodding, smiling. "Thank you for saving my life! I am eternally indebted to you. Thank you!"

“Why were those men going to kill you?” Nika asked, approaching.

“Oh,” Wentworth said, his voice shaky, “I o-o-owe the General s-s-some money. That’s all. J-j-just a money issue.”

“The dog!” Hawthorne raged, her jaws clenched. “He bleeds everyone he sees dry! He has no honor! He kills women, children, rich and poor, peasant and businessman.”

“You made a mistake doing business with him,” Nika observed.

“Tell me about it,” Wentworth quipped, regaining his composure. “I owe the man ten thousand dollars on a real estate deal in Nigeria, some properties an American company owns, and he tells me to come here to discuss the debt. I figure he’s going to give me a little more time to pay it off. He kills my two business associates. I’ve never seen such a total lack of professionalism.”

Wentworth smiled as polite of a smile as he could muster. The problem was that even when he tried to be friendly, his smile tended to be shark-like. The two women exchanged looks and Nika stepped forward.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

“Singh,” he replied.

“You don’t look Indian.”

“My grandpa. Good old grandpa Singh.”

“We need your help, Mr. Singh.”

“Just Singh, darling. No need to call me mister. As for helping you out, I think I’m about to high-tail it out of here. Doesn’t seem like this is my kind of scene.”

Wentworth got up off the concrete and dusted himself off. He surveyed himself to make sure he was whole and tucked his hands into his pockets. He had figured out the best way to play the situation. Why did it have to be a mutually exclusive proposition – Thompson or Hawthorne? Why not kill Thompson, make sure that the good General doesn’t come after him and then kill Hawthorne, because the bitch deserved to die for having caused him to go through Hell? Yes, that was the ticket. Kill them both.

“Please, sir,” Hawthorne pleaded.

“No,” he replied half-firmly, resistant enough to ward off suspicion but weak enough to allow himself to be convinced. “I’m a good man, a man of faith. I didn’t know who this General character was and I don’t involve myself in shady dealings!”

He began to walk away, past the gate, past the two women and into the grass field. The women didn’t let him get far. Nika ran to him and grabbed his arm. She turned him towards her and gazed into his eyes.

“This man killed my husband,” she whispered, just loud enough for him to hear, “and he killed my friend’s son. He’s going to have you killed too, even if you go back to wherever you’re from. He’ll send someone after you.”

“I’m not a killer,” Wentworth whispered back, his eyes filled with piety.

“I’m a psychologist at a college,” Nika said. “I never thought life would take me down this road. I just wanted to make a difference. I wanted to do some good. I wanted to help change the world, make it a better place – but the world doesn’t change so easily. It demands sacrifice, sacrifices most of us are not willing to make. I wish I had never gone down the road I went down, but once I chose that path there was no going back.”

Wentworth paused and tried to give the appearance of reflecting on what she had just said. He had to play it carefully, act it convincingly, not come off too hammy. He nodded, as if he had been affected by her words.

“You’re saying there is no going back for me either,” he said plainly.

“He’ll find you, wherever you go. You could move a million miles away and he would send someone after you. If you are his enemy, he will not stop until you are dead. Please, sir, you have to help us if you can. If you can help us get into the house...”

“I’ll do it,” he muttered. “Hell, this guy is going to kill me. I have a family. I have to keep them safe. My poor wife and my boy deserve better than to die a horrible death at the hands of some madman...I’ll do what I can...”

“Thank you.”

“Yes...yes, my good woman... you’re welcome...”

They turned around and met Hawthorne by the Opel. The three of them climbed inside without saying a word, Wentworth climbing behind the wheel. He didn't know what he was going to do exactly. No precise ideas came to mind. How could he just drive into the General's home? Wouldn't the General just meet him right away and shoot him?

"How do we get in?" Nika asked, sitting next to him.

"I tell him his guys started shooting at me and my guys, but my guys ended up shooting his guys. I make it seem like his little plan to kill me went wrong but I'm too stupid to understand what just happened."

"You think he'll let us in?"

"I know he will."

"How do you know that?"

"Because he's going to want to kill me face to face," he replied. Then, he realized that he was supposed to be a business man without detailed knowledge of the General's ways so he added: "Well, that's what I suspect from what I've seen today. I mean, he did kill two men. My poor business associates...they had families too!"

"More victims," Nika stated. "Add them to the list."

"This man has to be put down today," Hawthorne said from the back seat.

"He is going die," Nika said.

"How do you plan on killing him?" Wentworth asked. "He's inside a fortress. He's surrounded by armed guards."

Nika didn't reply. The two women had a little surprise lined up for the General and his men, something that would buy her and President Hawthorne enough time to do what they needed to do and get out of there. Something that would change the game.

Hawthorne picked up her cell phone and texted. *Be at the gates in five minutes.* Then, she tucked her mobile phone into her pocket. She winked at Nika. Nika nodded back. Everything was in place. The war would be a bloody one.

In Stamford...

They were in the television room at the hospital, a large space with red walls and yellow carpet, magazines strewn about and windows, windows displaying doctors and nurses walking by at rapid speeds down white halls. The Red Sox were losing again, bottom of the ninth. Waikiki Joe grunted in frustration, scratching his chest, his feet up on the coffee table, his other hand resting on his heaving stomach. Next to him, Sang yawned while Drex smiled politely, vacantly, at no one in particular.

"I can't believe this," Joe finally said. "This is why Alfred didn't want to watch the game. We're getting killed out there!"

"He's worried about his mother," Drex commented. "I'm worried about Nika."

"Please!" Joe scoffed. "If there's a lady on this planet who can take care of herself it's your sweet little wife. She could kill a bear with her own fingers, my friend. You wouldn't do her much good wherever she is."

"I'm worried. What if..." Drex paused and raised a trembling hand to his cheek. "What if she's dead or hurt, Joe? I should be with her."

"I'm sure she's fine. These broads can take care of themselves. The biggest mistake I made was volunteering to help this Hawthorne lady in the first place. I should have let her handle the situation alone. The whole thing would have probably been better – hell, we might not have had that shootout. My house might still be standing. Now, as it is, I have to deal with the insurance and -"

"My wife is missing, Joe!" Drex interrupted, exasperated. "Alfred's mother is missing! We can't get a hold of them! Alfred is so depressed, he doesn't even want to leave his room! I don't know what to do, Joe! I don't want to hear about the insurance right now!"

"Alright, alright. Relax."

Joe lifted the remote and changed the channel. He flipped through the limited selection until he reached a news station. The reporter was discussing the murder of a police officer inside Stamford Hospital. Three men, suspects in a shooting in Stamford, Connecticut, had murdered an officer using a scalpel and escaped. The officer's wife appeared on the screen, discussing her husband's life, asking for help tracking down the culprits.

“Poor lady lost her husband,” Sang grumbled. “I lost another one of my boys. We need to catch these guys, Joe. Someone needs to take care of them.”

“What do you think those two murdering skirts are up to?” Waikiki Joe said, snorting, pointing at Drex. “We’re talking about Nika and this President Hawthorne as if they’re dead or maimed or something, but those two Baracuda bitches are out there hunting these guys down. They’ve probably killed some of them already.”

“Y-you really think so, Joe?” Drex asked, his voice full of childish hope.

“Yep!” Joe replied confidently. “I’ve got a sixth and a seventh sense about these sorts of things, Drexie. Trust me. That do-gooder dame of yours is an annoying, self-righteous yuppie but that gal is harder than the hull of a submarine. She’s an African tiger, that woman, a black panther with teeth as sharp as porcupine quills.”

Joe switched the channel to a game show where the contestants had to answer questions correctly or their spouses were doused with real trash from a New York City dumpster. Joe giggled, patting his belly as wet newspapers and a milk container fell onto a suburban mother when her husband said that “Pensacola” was the capital of Florida.

“Dummy,” Joe laughed. “Everyone knows the capital of Florida is Miami!”

Drex and Sang exchanged a glance but both seemed to decide that it would be unwise to correct Joe, to inform him that Tallahassee was the capital of the Sunshine State. Joe would have just responded by laughing at the two of them, mumbling “yeah right, that’s a good one” and then turning back to the show. Slowly but surely, Drex began to feel that Alfred calling upon Waikiki Joe to protect his mother had been a really, really bad idea.

“Let me do the talking,” Wentworth instructed as they approached the gate to the mansion. “I’ll tell him that the two men he sent to meet me at the helicopter pad pulled out their firearms and started shooting. I’ll say that my two guys shot his two guys and vice versa. I’ll say I was the only survivor.”

“You *were* the only survivor,” Nika observed. She was beginning to suspect that something was off with this so-called businessman. The fellow had a rat-like aspect to him.

“Makes it all the more believable,” Wentworth quipped. “Doesn’t it? I think it does.”

Wentworth came to a stop near a metallic box outside the gate and pressed the black button. He could see three men armed with machine guns, dressed in military uniforms, standing just behind the gate, waiting to greet them. He would have to explain the two women with him if they asked about them. He had no idea what he would say.

“Hello?” a distorted voice asked. “Who is this?”

“Yes. Hello. Howdy. I’m here to see the General. There’s been a misunderstanding, you see. He sent a few men to meet me at the helicopter landing pad and there was a shootout sort of a thing. I just need to speak to him face-to-face, set things right.”

There was a long pause. Wentworth wiped the sweat from his forehead and looked at the women nervously. He tried to smile but couldn’t so he turned his gaze back to the box. When a voice came from the device, it was no longer a sentry – it was the voice of the General himself. The wolf was speaking to the lamb.

“Who is this?” the General shouted through the box.

“G-g-general? General Thompson, y-y-you and I were s-s-supposed to have a conversation today. I was g-g-going to explain myself. There must be some mistake. My two companions are dead and the two men you sent to meet us are dead.”

“Dead?”

“Yes, sir. There was a shootout. My two employees killed your two employees. I had planned to deal with you personally but there m-m-must be s-s-some mistake, sir.”

There was another long pause. Wentworth knew exactly what General Thompson was thinking right then and there: *could this idiot really be stupid enough to walk into my fortress after I just tried to kill him?* The whole situation was ridiculous. Wentworth knew that but he had to proceed, to see if he could resolve this matter either by turning in the women or killing the General, or both. He would have to figure something out.

“Fine,” the General said, his voice hollow with disbelief, like a voice in a dream. The camera above the gate turned towards the car and focused on the people inside. “I see that you have two women with you. I see that one of them, in the backseat...let me adjust the

focus...yes, yes...oh it's President Ellen Hawthorne, the bitch herself...this is *very good*, Wentworth! I think you might have bought yourself another life my feline friend."

"I thought you said your name was Singh!" Nika exclaimed.

"Wentworth Singh," Wentworth replied, shakily.

"You've delivered them to me, my good friend!" the General shouted, joyful. "Just as you promised! Good man! My good friend!"

A static-drenched burst of laughter exploded from the metal box. Slowly, the gate began to swing open. The three men in fatigues waited with their machine guns pointed at the vehicle. They were going to gun the women down. They were going to gun Wentworth down too and Wentworth knew it. The General's words had been meaningless – he wasn't going to spare anybody.

"A firing squad," Nika observed. "He's going to come out to watch it himself. Then, he's going to give the order to have us gunned down."

Sure enough, in a matter of seconds, the General emerged from a shadow on the patio behind the gate. He was dressed in a white suit with a white shirt and red tie. The three military men stood in the middle of the patio and the General casually walked to where they were standing. They parted for him, like Moses parting the Red Sea, two of them now standing to his left and one to his right.

"He's smiling, the bastard," Hawthorne said, her teeth clenched.

"Drive in slowly," Nika commanded, her gun pressed against Wentworth's rib cage. "You're involved somehow. I know it. If you try to rush in there, I'll shoot you. I'll kill you before you get to do whatever you're planning to do."

"He's going to start firing and kill the three of us," Wentworth whimpered. "I'm going to back up and we're driving the hell out of here. This is suicide! We have to go!!!"

Pop! Pop!

Nika shot Wentworth twice. Once, in the ribs, and, the second time, in his skull. Then, she placed her own foot on the accelerator, pushing the man over as she did so, and slowly glided the car towards the entrance.

The General looked ecstatic now, motioning with his arms for the car to proceed into the patio, to drive past the gate. As soon as they were close enough for him to see their faces as they died, he would give the order for his men to start firing.

The car, however, did not roll into the patio. Rather, it stopped right at the gate, refusing to proceed any further. The General sighed. He reached into his pocket and removed a pistol. They were going to have to kill these women the hard way.

"Approach the car!" the General ordered. "Shoot them on sight! Fire at them until there's nothing left of them but blood and torn flesh! Kill them! Kill them all!!!"

The three men ran towards the vehicle, the General waiting cautiously at the end of the patio driveway, his pistol ready. Before his three soldiers had reached the car, the two women had opened the doors of the vehicle and rolled out onto the ground. The General was not worried. These were women. They would be dead soon.

Suddenly, however, a sea of men raced past the gates. Ten. Twenty. Thirty. No, forty. No, wait, fifty! Fifty men firing weapons, all of them dressed in rags, armed with machine guns, eager to kill the man who had raped their daughters. He recognized some of them. These were the villagers he tithed.

"Close the gates!" he shouted. "Close the fucking gates! Close them!!!"

The gates began to close as slowly as they had been opened – but the car was there, in the middle of the entrance. The gate pressed against the sides of the vehicle, crushing the car, but the gates remained open. The entrance could not be secured.

"Close the gates!" the General shouted. "Close them! Get all the men out here! It's an invasion! Get all the men out here! Get them!!!"

His three soldiers lay dead, shot numerous times by the crowd, their limbs hacked with machetes. Seventy. There must have been seventy men on the patio now. These were multiple villages. Men from every village where he had sampled girls. Men who felt shame that they had been forced to allow their daughters to fall into prostitution, victims of a rapist who could not get enough.

"Get out here!" the General shouted. "Get out here! It's an invasion!!!"

His men began to appear on the patio, racing towards their General. Before they could reach him, the invading tribesmen were within firing range. The General fired at them, numerous shots, killing two of them, but they fired back and the General collapsed in a sea of blood.

Then, the invading villagers picked him up, some men holding him up while others hacked away at his body with their blades. They tore his arms from his trunk, his legs too, and – finally – his head was severed and bandied about like a beach ball.

The General's men stood frozen, unsure about how to proceed. Fearing for their own lives, lacking any commander, they went back inside the mansion and locked the doors. They watched nervously from the windows as the men danced holding the man's torso.

Ellen Hawthorne emerged from the crowd, standing on the hood of the vehicle. The crowd erupted into applause. When she had first been elected, the men of the villages had doubted the ability of a woman to rule over Liberia, but now they could see the truth. Women could be as venomous as snakes, as deadly as charging gorillas, as determined as hyenas, as hard as the clenched fist of a brawler. Such a woman could not be stopped.

"Hawthorne! Hawthorne!" They shouted in unison. "Hawthorne! Hawthorne!"

Nika Drex, hiding under the car, smiled. She had avenged her husband's death. She rolled out from under the Opel and looked at where the General's torso was being tossed about. She would need a souvenir, something that would remind her of this moment for the rest of her life. Reaching towards her right leg, she found her knife in its sheath. Pulling it out, examining the blade, she walked towards the General's body.

The year passed as gently as it could have, given the circumstances. Liberia was not engulfed in war but the remnants of the General's forces had been rounded up and arrested or killed. Blood continued to flow amidst the trees and streams of that violent land. Ellen Hawthorne had consolidated her power but had announced that she would not parlay her popularity amidst the poor into a demagoguery that would allow her to hold onto the reins. Rather, she would face reelection in an unhampered, honest electoral process – a rarity in her continent. All in all, blood fell on African soil but less blood than at most times.

In Stamford, things had also moved forward in a mix of good and bad news. Waikiki Joe had been dismissed from the police for his failure to notify them of a potential threat before the shootout had erupted, and he had ended up opening his own bar, The Mighty Gunslinger Saloon. Joe continued to drink too much, smoke too much, and never lost an opportunity to discuss his heroic guarding of a foreign dignitary, "like Dirty Harry." Sang returned to work and continued frequenting the same massage parlor. The city soon forgot about the massacre, the tale of the Liberian President's visit to their community falling into the dustbin of local lore.

As for Nika and Drex, they returned to their previous marital bliss, just as dedicated to saving the world one recycled can at a time as they had always been. After she had returned home from Liberia, dreading the sight of an apartment that would remind her of her dead husband, she had found her love sitting on the couch, holding a can of coconut water. She had screamed and he had screamed too, and they had held each other crying for almost two hours, kissing each other into exhaustion.

They were expecting a child now – Barnaby Drex they would call him. She was starting to show. It was a quiet night, one year to the day after she had returned home from Liberia. They were sitting at the dinner table, watching a BBC documentary, playing cards, listening to Chopin.

"Do we keep it?" he asked, pointing to a jar sitting on a pedestal by the table. "After the baby is born, do we throw it out? I mean, I think we should get rid of it. It's sickening. I can't believe we kept it for this long. Something must be wrong with us."

"Why would we throw it out?" she asked, puzzled. "I like it."

"Well," he said, smiling, "it is a bit *disturbing*. Isn't it?"

"Why is it disturbing?"

"Oh, I don't know. Having to explain it."

“I want Barnaby to know who his mother was, the sort of strong woman she was. The last thing I want is for Barnaby to have the impression that his mother is just some boring old woman who works at a University. I want him to know the real me.”

“I think you’ll scare the fucking daylights out of poor Barnaby,” he stated.

“Good!” she said, chuckling. “A mother should love her son, and be willing to die for him – and her husband – but she should not be too much of a pushover. A little bit of fear is good for a child, makes them respect the female head of the household.”

“Head of the household?!!” he laughed. “Where do I come in? Jeeze, Nika, you might as well take mine off and put them in there too! That’s how you make me feel!”

“Don’t tempt me!” she jested. “Don’t you tempt me.”

They smiled and joked and laughed, the light falling upon their joyful faces, falling upon her stomach and the hope that it contained, falling upon the walls of their happy home, falling upon the jar on the pedestal staring at them. Inside the jar, the formaldehyde glistening, were two round orbs, floating up and down, up and down, perpetually. Years would pass, decades would come and go, but Nika Drex would always hold on to that jar as a reminder of the adventures she had experienced, saving the life of a President, making the world a better place. She liked to say that she was a woman but she possessed the biggest pair of balls in the world and – given the contents of that jar – no one could say that that *wasn’t* one hundred percent God’s honest truth.